

Journal of the  
**GRACE**  
Evangelical Society

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*"Faith Alone In Christ Alone"*



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# ASSURANCE: OF THE ESSENCE OF SAVING FAITH

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Mesquite, Texas

## I. Introduction

A recent political cartoon in *USA Today* caught my attention. It is surprisingly relevant to my subject.

In the cartoon a man and a woman were facing each other. Both of them looked like somewhat off-beat types. In the first panel, the man said, "Elvis is alive," and the woman replied something like, "I agree with you." In the second panel, the man said, "I was kidnapped by aliens," and the woman replied, "I believe you." In the third panel, the man said, "Congress and the White House are cooperating on the budget," and the woman turned away from him and said, "Nut!"

Of course, the cartoonist is indulging in political satire. Somewhat hyperbolically he suggests that it is easier to believe Elvis is alive or that aliens kidnap earthlings, than it is to believe that a Democratic President and a Republican Congress can actually cooperate on a matter of major political importance. But along with this satire comes a reminder about the ordinary, common-sense way of talking about belief.

As the cartoonist and all the rest of us know, believing something may have little to do with the actual evidence for that belief. A person *can* believe that Elvis is alive, even though the evidence for that is presumably rather meager. The same goes for the idea of alien kidnappings. And on the other hand, some people will feel that the idea of Republican and Democratic cooperation would require quite a bit of proof to be believable. But if a person thinks any of these things is true, he obviously believes them.

Saving faith really is not any different. A person either believes the offer of eternal life or he doesn't. It really isn't relevant how he came to believe it, whether his or her reasons were good ones or not. The issue is not *how* a person came to believe, but whether or not he *does*. But that leads me to the subject of this article. If someone *does* believe the

offer of eternal life—as the Bible presents this offer—he will also be *sure* that he has eternal life. This is what we mean when we say that *assurance is of the essence of saving faith*.

I will try to defend this claim biblically. But let me just restate the matter in order to make it clear. The nature of the gospel message is such that, when a person believes it, he necessarily has assurance of eternal salvation. No matter what else he might believe, if he is not assured, he has not believed the gospel. The fact of the matter is that a person may believe certain things about the gospel without actually believing the true gospel. Or he may believe something *very close* to the true gospel which is not, in fact, the gospel. In either case, he will not have the assurance that goes with saving faith.

It follows from what I have just said that nobody ever got saved by believing the Lordship gospel. Of course some people *do* believe that gospel who are *already* saved. I am not talking about that. I just mean that on the terms of the Lordship gospel alone, no one can get saved, since this form of doctrine garbles the gospel so badly that assurance of salvation is not available. And if some people *do* find assurance in a Lordship gospel, that assurance is a delusion since it is not founded on biblical truth.

So you see how important this issue is. This is not an adjunct discussion *in connection with* the gospel. It goes to the core of things. Only the true biblical gospel gives valid assurance, and believing that gospel *always* gives valid assurance. False gospels either give no assurance at all or give an assurance that is false and deceitful.

Why is that? Because only the biblical gospel is true! And if I do not believe *truth*, I cannot be saved or have valid assurance. Remember, Jesus said, “Thy word is truth.” Believing something false never saved anybody, although believing a falsehood may give false assurance.

So suppose I believe that Elvis is alive and humans have been captured by aliens and I also believe the true biblical gospel. Am I saved? Of course. And suppose I believe the President and the Congress *are* working hard together on the budget and that God and I must work hard together to get me to heaven. Am I saved? Of course *not*.

In the former case I will have valid assurance. In the latter case, I will not.

So much for my introduction. Let me now proceed to consider my topic under three headings. These are the biblical basis, assurance and the current debate, and the practical consequences for evangelism.

## II. The Biblical Basis

A doctrine is only as good as its biblical support. Biblically speaking, why do we say that assurance is of the essence of saving faith? We can make the case easily from the Gospel of John.

It is widely recognized that two kinds of statements in John's Gospel describe saving faith. One is the phrase "believe in" (Greek, *pisteuō eis*). The other is the phrase "believe that" (*pisteuō hoti*). Although some interpreters have tried to see a difference between the phrases, this is impossible. Since both kinds of statements are used to indicate how eternal life is obtained, there can be no difference between them. Two things that are equal to the same thing are equal to each other.

Rudolf Bultmann was quite right to say that to believe in Jesus is shorthand for to believe that Jesus is the Christ. In other words, *pisteuō eis auton* (John 3:16) is a shorthand way of saying *pisteuō hoti Iēsous estin ho Christos* (John 20:31). Naturally, John 20:31 is determinative precisely because it is part of the thematic statement for the Gospel of John.

I also need to remind you of a statement in 1 John 5:1, which has the same effect. There the same apostle writes: "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God." Please note: For John there are no exceptions to this. It is not said that *many* people who believe that Jesus is the Christ are born of God. Instead, John claims that *whoever* does so is a regenerate person.

Before I go further, let me note this. There is no difference in kind between believing that Elvis is alive and believing that Jesus is the Christ. Both are acts of faith. Of course, the former faith is unfounded. The latter is divinely sanctioned. The former is misplaced faith. The latter is saving faith.

The Christian community has been plagued for a long time by its misapprehension about faith. We have been told so often that saving faith is more than intellectual assent that we have fallen into a trap. I have argued in *Absolutely Free!*<sup>1</sup> that the debate over "intellectual assent" is semantically flawed. Today the phrase "intellectual assent" implies that the "assent" in question is emotionally detached and abstract or theoretical. Such ideas have no place in a discussion about saving faith. Is the belief that Elvis is alive "intellectual assent"? Not for most people who hold this belief. It is usually accompanied by rather obvious emotions. But that is irrelevant to whether the matter is believed or not.

<sup>1</sup>Zane C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1989).



Emotions may or may not accompany such belief, but they are not part of the definition of faith.

In *Absolutely Free!* I suggest that we give up using the phrase “intellectual assent” because of its pejorative overtones. But I will not hold my breath waiting for the Lordship people to give up one of their favorite “theological cuss words.” If the grace position were as weak as theirs, I wouldn’t give it up either.

But I insist. Believing that Jesus is the Christ means believing one of the most wonderful truths known to man. Furthermore, it is *God’s* truth. I would never describe anything like that as “intellectual assent.”

But of course a question immediately arises. If I go out on the street and ask passersby whether they believe that Jesus is the Christ, many of them will affirm that they do. And many might reply, “Of course, isn’t that His name?”

This leads to an obvious consideration. We need to know what it is that John means when he talks about Jesus being the Christ. What exactly does a person believe about Jesus when he believes *that*? Fortunately John makes this clear to us. And here the crucial text is the famous one in John 11:25-27.

Please note that this text stands at a pivotal point in John’s Gospel. The last and the greatest of John’s seven signs is about to occur—the raising of Lazarus. Remember that the signs of John’s Gospel are written to bring men to believe that Jesus is the Christ. John 20:30-31 says this plainly. So we might readily expect a significant statement in a climactic text like John 11. And that is exactly what we get.

You remember the narrative. Jesus has just assured Martha that her brother will rise again. Her reply indicates that she believes he will—but only “in the resurrection at the last day” (11:24). So she needs a reminder of who it is who stands before her. So Jesus speaks these well-remembered words:

*“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die”* (John 11:25-26a).

Notice how Jesus here does more than simply identify Himself. Yes, He *is* the Resurrection and the Life. But He is more than that. He is the One who guarantees certain things to the believer in Him. As the Resurrection, He guarantees that even if the believer dies, he will live again—that is, he will be resurrected. As the Life, He guarantees the believer will never die—that is, he or she will always have eternal life.

Jesus' statement to Martha, therefore, is an identification of Himself in reference to everyone who believes in Him.

Then comes the crucial question. Jesus asks Martha: "Do you believe this?" (John 11:26b). Notice the simplicity that is involved here. Jesus says: "I have just stated certain facts about Myself and the one who believes in Me. Do you hold these facts to be true? Is this what you believe about Me?"

And what is Martha's reply? Well, not surprisingly, it is a full-fledged articulation of the theme verse of 20:31. Martha replies: "*Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world.*"

Notice closely. Jesus says: "Do you believe this?" and Martha says: "I believe that You are the Christ." To believe what Jesus just stated about Himself is to believe that He is the Christ.

Thus to believe that Jesus is the Christ is to believe that He guarantees resurrection and eternal life to everyone who believes Him to be the Christ. The Christ is the Guarantor of these things to every believer. To deny that He does this for every believer, or to doubt that He does it, is not to believe what Martha believed. To deny or doubt this, is not to believe what John wants his readership to believe.

If I believe it, I *know* that I have eternal life. There is no way I can believe what Jesus tells Martha, and yet not know whether I have eternal life or will be resurrected by Jesus.

Obviously, Martha could not have said something like, "Yes, Lord, I believe this but I'm not sure You will resurrect *me*." To have said that would have been to challenge Jesus' veracity or to doubt His ability to keep His word. That would have been a form of unbelief. Martha could not make herself an exception to Jesus' words without calling the whole statement into question.

Of course, some people will still try to say, "I believe it is true, but how do I know I *really* believe it and therefore it is true of me?" But no matter who makes this statement it is actually nonsense. It is like saying, "I believe that Elvis is alive, but how do I know I *really* believe it?" We would send a person who said that to see a psychiatrist. But in theology we actually take such a statement as if it were a meaningful observation.

It is not. It is actually the product of years of theological brainwashing. We have been told so many times that some people have a spurious belief and that we should check out our own faith to make sure it is true saving faith, that we almost believe such nonsense. The Bible knows nothing about this sort of thing.



To the man born blind, but now possessing sight, Jesus said: "Do you believe in the Son of God?" (John 9:35). The man replied, "Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him?" (John 9:36). Jesus answers, "You have both seen Him and it is He who is talking with you" (John 9:37).

What then does this man reply? Not, "I think so," or, "It remains to be seen if I will persevere." No, instead he says: "Lord, I believe!" (John 9:38). As surely as Martha says, "Yes...I believe," so does this man.

It is one of the great absurdities of theology that I can't really know whether I believe God's saving truth or not. *Of course* I can know whether I believe the same thing Martha believed. But if I do, I also know that I have eternal life. Therefore, assurance is of the essence of saving faith.

I need to add one proviso. I do not mean by any of this that a believer can never doubt his or her salvation. Nor do I mean that one's faith cannot be lost. When John the Baptist asked, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?" (Matt 11:3), he was doubting his earlier conviction that Jesus was indeed the Christ. And Paul spoke of people whose faith had been overturned (2 Tim 2:18).

But what I *do* mean is this: at the moment of saving faith the believer is sure that he is eternally saved. I do not hold to the doctrine of the indefectibility of faith, as Reformed theologians do, or even as John Calvin did. I do hold to the indefectibility of God's saving work in the believer.

Several years ago I was in Dr. Charles Ryrie's apartment with a friend. My friend asked Dr. Ryrie, "Can a believer stop believing?" As usual, Dr. Ryrie was crisp and concise. His answer was: "Of course."

### III. Assurance and the Current Debate

One of the most effective responses that the Free Grace Movement has made to Lordship Salvation is to home in on their doctrine of assurance. There is no doubt that we have scored a direct hit and that the other side felt the blow. Since the publication of *Absolutely Free!* the other side has been fairly prolific in addressing the assurance issue.

And well they might! The doctrine of assurance has been a notorious problem issue in Reformed thought for centuries. Much ink has been spilled in that time debating this problem. Now the Reformed people are back at it again, galvanized, as their own writings show, by concern over the charges made by Free Grace exponents.

I do not claim to have read all the material written on this subject since 1989, the year *Absolutely Free!* was published. But I have certainly read



some of it. I would like to survey several writers on this theme and then turn more careful attention to R. C. Sproul and his recent book entitled: *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification*.<sup>2</sup>

Of course I must mention Dr. MacArthur. His first edition of *The Gospel According to Jesus*<sup>3</sup> had only one reference to assurance. It was found on p. 23 where he said this:

Genuine assurance comes from seeing the Holy Spirit's transforming work in one's life, not from clinging to the memory of some experience.

This false dichotomy was all he had to say on this weighty issue. In the revised and expanded edition,<sup>4</sup> that statement remains unchanged, but assurance is also referred to on pp. xxi-xxii of the Introduction and on pp. 135, 214-215, and 273-75. In addition, Dr. MacArthur wrote a whole book on assurance, *Saved Without a Doubt*,<sup>5</sup> and refers to it numerous times in *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles*.<sup>6</sup> All I wish to say here is that his position has been brought up to speed in terms of standard Reformed teaching on assurance, which stresses both objective and subjective grounds for assurance.

I also want just to mention two other books, both of which I have reviewed in the GES Journal. First there is the 1991 volume by John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism*.<sup>7</sup> The second is the 1992 volume edited by Michael Horton entitled *Christ the Lord: The Reformation and Lordship Salvation*.<sup>8</sup> Both of these writers are rather intense polemicists and do not

<sup>2</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, Revised and Expanded Edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> MacArthur, *Saved Without A Doubt* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> MacArthur, *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991). Reviewed in *JOTGES* (Autumn 1991): 59-70.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Horton, *Christ the Lord: The Reformation and Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992). Reviewed in *JOTGES* (Autumn 1993): 25-38.

go out of their way to represent their opponents fairly. Both men reflect the basic Reformed position on assurance. Let me move to some material that I have not yet evaluated in print.

In 1992 Robert A. Peterson wrote an article entitled, "Christian Assurance: Its Possibility and Foundations."<sup>9</sup> Peterson was at the time Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Covenant Theological Seminary. Surprisingly, he rejects Roman Catholic opposition to "absolute" assurance. In typical Reformed fashion he grounds assurance on the promises of the Word, the inner witness of the Spirit, and the believer's perseverance in the faith. This carries him right back to the Westminster Confession's doctrine of assurance, which speaks of "the infallible assurance of faith" based on the three foundations just mentioned. Peterson does not seem to realize that the Westminster Confession actually makes infallible assurance impossible.

Peterson, however, is kinder to our camp than most writers. For example, he says: "Some well-meaning Evangelical Christians would reduce the three foundations of assurance to one. Zane Hodges and the Grace Evangelical Society want to make assurance completely certain" (p. 23). Later, on the same page he says: "In an effort to promote the doctrine of absolute assurance based on faith in Christ alone Hodges and his colleagues have resorted to forced exegesis of biblical passages."

Thank you, Dr. Peterson! Your irenic spirit is a breath of fresh air. But perhaps you, my friends and readers of *JOTGES*, will not like being reduced to the status of colleagues of mine. If so, feel free to write Dr. Peterson about that! So far, cloning has been confined to sheep.

Rather less irenic is D. A. Carson in an article entitled, "Reflections on Christian Assurance."<sup>10</sup> I have reviewed this article at length in this Journal<sup>11</sup> so I will not repeat myself here. I will point out again, however, that Carson is tied to the standard Reformed "objective—subjective" grounds for assurance and has not escaped the inherent difficulties of that position.

<sup>9</sup>Robert A. Peterson, "Christian Assurance: Its Possibility and Foundations," *Presbyterian* (18, 4):10-24.

<sup>10</sup>D. A. Carson, "Reflections on Christian Assurance," *Westminster Journal of Theology* (54[1992]):1-29.

<sup>11</sup>Zane Hodges, "The New Puritanism Part 1: Carson on Christian Assurance," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Spring 1993):19-31.



For example, he states: "I have not argued that perseverance is the basis for assurance, rather I have argued that failure to persevere serves to undermine assurance. The *basis* for assurance is Christ and his work and its entailments."<sup>12</sup> This is pretty standard Reformed stuff. The objective realities of Christ's work on the Cross and His promise of salvation to the believer are considered certainties which all good Reformed people believe without question. But the problem is that Reformed people are not sure the promises apply to *them personally* unless they can confirm that they are among the elect to whom the promises are effective. Thus perseverance, an essential sign of election, becomes the basis for *subjective*, or individual, assurance. But since I cannot know until my life ends if I have persevered, personal assurance is held hostage to my perseverance in faith and good works. Carson ought to have said, "*The possibility of a failure* to persevere undermines assurance." In fact, it effectively undermines all possibility of personal assurance.

I note in passing that the theonomist Kenneth L. Gentry doesn't like the grace position either. In an article entitled, "Assurance and Lordship Salvation" he states: "If we say that assurance is essential to true faith, then we are ultimately saying: 'No man is saved in Christ until he has come to believe that Christ has saved him forever.'"<sup>13</sup> Though Gentry calls himself a Calvinist, he conveniently overlooks that this is virtually what Calvin himself said. I shall quote Calvin later.

More interesting is the position of Joel R. Beeke who, as of 1994, was the Pastor of the First Netherlands Reformed Congregation in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Beeke has written a doctoral dissertation entitled "Personal Assurance of Faith"<sup>14</sup> and a book called *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation*.<sup>15</sup> I have seen neither the dissertation nor the book, but I have read with interest his article bearing the title, "Does Assurance Belong to the Essence of Faith? Calvin and the Calvinists."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Carson, "Reflections," 29.

<sup>13</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry, "Assurance and Lordship Salvation," *Dispensationalism in Transition* (September 1993), 2.

<sup>14</sup> Joel R. Beeke, "Personal Assurance of Faith: English Puritanism and the Dutch 'Nadere Reformatie' From Westminster to Alexander Comrie (1640-1760)," Ph.D. Dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1988.

<sup>15</sup> Beeke, *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation* (NY: Peter Lang, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> Beeke, "Does Assurance Belong to the Essence of Faith? Calvin and the Calvinists," *The Master's Seminary Journal* (Spring 1994):43-71.

Beeke admits that "Whereas the early Reformers held that assurance is part and parcel with faith, post-Reformation divines felt free to distinguish assurance from faith as witnessed by chap 18 of the Westminster Confession."<sup>17</sup> He also makes this further admission: "The bulk of current scholarship, however, no longer views the post-Reformation struggle to develop a detailed doctrine of assurance as a faithful outworking of early Reformation principles."<sup>18</sup> Among the writers mentioned in this connection are R. T. Kendall (*Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*);<sup>19</sup> M. Charles Bell, (*Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance*);<sup>20</sup> and Holmes Rolston III who, as far back as 1972, wrote a book entitled *John Calvin Versus the Westminster Confession*,<sup>21</sup> published by John Knox Press. I possess and have read all three books, although there is much other literature that I have not read.

Beeke's admission is significant in that, unlike most of the writers I have been discussing, he frankly admits that the prevalent view in contemporary scholarship is that post-Reformation theologians departed significantly from John Calvin's own view of assurance. Needless to say, it would be awkward for protagonists in the Lordship debate to admit that they are defending a view of assurance significantly at variance with that of Calvin himself. Most are very guarded on this issue, to say the least.

I personally think there can be no doubt that John Calvin held to the view I am maintaining today, that assurance is of the essence of saving faith. For example, in *Institutes* 3.2.16, Calvin writes as follows (quoting from the 1960 Westminster Press edition, edited by John T. McNeill, and translated by Ford Lewis Battles):

Here, indeed, is the chief hinge on which faith turns: that we do not regard the promises of mercy that God offers as true only outside ourselves, but not at all in us; rather that we make them ours by inwardly embracing them. Hence, at last is born that confidence which Paul elsewhere calls "peace" unless someone may prefer to derive peace from it. Now it is an assurance that renders the conscience calm and peaceful before God's judgment.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>19</sup> R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: University Press, 1979).

<sup>20</sup> M. Charles Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance* (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1985).

<sup>21</sup> Holmes Rolston III., *John Calvin Versus the Westminster Confession* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1972).



Shortly after these words comes this famous statement:

Briefly, he alone is truly a believer who, convinced by a firm conviction that God is a kindly and well-disposed Father toward him, promises himself all things on the basis of his generosity; who relying upon the promises of divine benevolence toward him, lays hold on an undoubted expectation of salvation.

I don't see how this could be much clearer.

I admit, however, that Calvin's belief in the indefectibility of faith led him into some very dubious discussions. Dr. Joseph Dillow has pointed this out in his *Reign of the Servant Kings*.<sup>22</sup> Still, in so far as my own reading in Calvin goes, I think Calvin always attempted to be consistent with the statements I have just quoted. That he did not always succeed should not greatly surprise any of us who have done a great deal of writing, especially on theological topics.

Returning briefly to Beeke, we find in him an effort to bridge the gulf modern scholarship often sees between Calvin and later Calvinists on the issue of assurance. His efforts are not very persuasive. Beeke has recourse to Alexander Comrie (1706–1774), one of the leading lights of the so-called Dutch Second Reformation, and to a somewhat abstruse distinction between faith as *habitus* (= disposition) and faith as *actus* (= specific acts of faith). This is not the place to analyze Beeke's position, except to say that we probably don't need to worry that it will catch on.

This brings us finally to R. C. Sproul and his 1995 book, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification*. As far as my own reading goes, Sproul appears to be the most competent American theologian of the Reformed persuasion. *Faith Alone* is a model of theological clarity. One can almost always comprehend exactly what Sproul believes and why he believes it. This is saying a lot for a theological writer.

Of course, *Faith Alone* was not written to address the Lordship salvation controversy. Instead it was written to critique the concord reached between certain Evangelicals and Roman Catholics which is expressed in the 1994 document entitled, *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium*. (I will refer to this document hereafter as ECT.) Among the leading figures associated with the framing of the document is the Lutheran-turned-Catholic, John Richard Neuhaus, and the noted Evangelical, Charles Colson, a post-

<sup>22</sup>Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings* (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle Publishing Co., 1992).

Watergate convert to Christianity. Other Evangelical signers include: J. I. Packer, Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ, and Pat Robertson.

Sproul is properly dismayed that the document compromises the biblical gospel. He is disturbed by the statement in ECT that "All who accept Christ as Lord and Savior are brothers and sisters in Christ." Rightly he wonders, "Does faith in Christ as Savior and Lord include trust in the biblical gospel? Does saving faith require a trust in the righteousness of Christ alone as the grounds of our justification? Or may a person have a different view of the gospel and still be a Christian?"<sup>23</sup>

Sproul proceeds to argue that "faith alone" (*sola fide*) is of the essence of the gospel, which means that without it any gospel is not the biblical gospel. He states, "If a doctrine is essential, it is of the essence and cannot be rejected without departing from essential Christianity."<sup>24</sup> He further states, "If *sola fide* is essential to the gospel and to Christianity and if Rome has not adopted *sola fide* as its doctrinal position, then ECT seriously betrays the gospel."<sup>25</sup> To this he later adds, "The unity that was once tacitly assumed to exist among professed Evangelicals does not in fact exist. One repercussion of ECT is that it has revealed a serious disunity among Evangelicals on the question of justification and the nature of Rome."<sup>26</sup> I have no quarrel with any of this. It is as logical as it is uncompromising. But the same sword could be turned on Dr. Sproul's *own view* of saving faith. Sproul has a great deal to say about saving faith. It is striking that he completely ignores the controversy over the difference between Calvin's concept of faith and that which is common to most Reformed theologians *today*. Had Sproul admitted that here, too, there is no evangelical unity, his case against ECT would have been eviscerated. If Evangelicals cannot even agree on what is meant by true saving faith, how can they reasonably object to the absence of *sola fide* from ECT? That would be like defending the personal dignity of the unknown soldier.

If in fact Calvin held, as I believe he did, that assurance is of the essence of saving faith, then Sproul must pronounce Calvin wrong and post-Reformation Calvinists right, and he must give up the pretense that Evangelicals have a historical unity on the nature of saving faith. As it

<sup>23</sup> Sproul, *Faith Alone*, 29-30.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.



turns out, Sproul bases his view of the nature of saving faith almost entirely on the Latin word *fiducia* in the famous threefold analysis of faith, in which *fiducia* is the third element.<sup>27</sup> Into this word, Sproul pours all the implications that Reformed theologians like to see in saving faith and which imply a change in attitude toward God and His commandments. It is precisely these implications that make it impossible for Reformed people to verify their faith apart from perseverance and good works.

Sproul has no Scripture for any of this. His argument is basically an exposition of the implications of *fiducia* in the famous definition. In passing he notes that "Gordon Clark makes a fascinating case that even this added element is at root intellectual."<sup>28</sup> That is putting it mildly. What Clark really said was that *fiducia*, in the famous definition, is really a tautology since it means trust and is essentially a synonym for faith. So, says Clark, the popular definition of faith amounts to saying that "faith consists of understanding, assent, and faith."<sup>29</sup> This does not leave much of a platform for Sproul to build on!

In conclusion I would say this about the current state of the controversy. We should hold our Reformed critics' feet to the fire. We should show them that they have departed significantly from the biblical doctrine of assurance and faith and that their own view of faith cannot even be traced back to the earliest Reformers. And using Sproul's own logic with regard to *sola fide*, we should point out that without assurance, which is of the essence of saving faith, their definition of saving faith is not biblical saving faith at all.

#### IV. Practical Consequences for Evangelism

The fact that assurance is of the essence of saving faith can significantly affect how we deal with people about the gospel. We dare not lead people through some process in which the process allows for a conversion experience in which assurance is lacking.

R. T. Kendall has made the important point that saving faith is not a decision, but a *persuasion*. As he points out, Rom 4:21-22 states that Abraham was "fully *persuaded* that what He [i.e., God] had promised, He was able also to perform. And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness" (*italics added*). Obviously, I cannot *decide* to believe what

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 82-88.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>29</sup> Gordon Clark, *Faith and Saving Faith* (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1983), 52.

I am not persuaded is true. And when I am persuaded that something is true I have already believed it.

So Kendall has made the additional point that he believes that most false professions are made when the decision precedes the persuasion. That occurs, for example, when someone is led to say a prayer without the inner conviction that Christ saves him at the moment he believes. Perhaps he only hopes this will save him and if the minister tells him it does, then he may be able to ignore his doubts. But eventually they will surface.

I should know, because I am an example of this process. As a young boy under conviction of my need to be saved, I went forward in response to an invitation given at a Baptist vacation Bible school. The minister led us in prayer (I can't recall whether I prayed in my heart or not) and then he assured us that we were saved. He even visited my house to inform my mother that her son had gotten saved. But her son was not sure of that at all. And for years I struggled with my doubts. Finally, years later, as a young man about to enter high school, I trusted Christ at a Plymouth Brethren meeting where the gospel was preached but no public invitation was given. That night I was absolutely sure. As it happened I believed in between stanzas of a closing hymn. Later when I told my family about it, my brother David, who had been sitting next to me, remarked that he had noticed that I seemed to be singing louder at the end of the hymn than at the beginning.

Not better, mind you. Just louder. I was not conscious of that, but if I were Reformed I'd say it was the first evidence of my salvation. But, of course, I didn't need it. I was sure.

So I want to urge you to try to avoid leading people through some process or decision which can precede the genuine persuasion of faith. I myself am very careful about this now.

## V. Conclusion

A couple of years ago an appointment was arranged for me to talk with a young Hispanic man who had been attending our meetings at Victor Street Bible Chapel and was going with one of our Christian young ladies. I went through the gospel carefully, using chiefly the Gospel of John. When I was finished I asked if he had any questions and he said he did not.

Then I said something like this: "I don't want you to say anything to me right now, but perhaps you have already believed this or perhaps

you will in the near future. If you have, or when you do, please tell me because I would like to know.”

I did it this way for a reason. I was well aware that the very polite Hispanic culture would incline a young man like this to tell me that he believed what I said whether he did or not. I did not want a false profession, no matter how polite it was. So I repeated my instructions about not saying anything to me right then.

But when I finished doing this, my young friend proceeded to ignore my directions. Here is what he said: “Zane, I do believe. I have the gift and I will be with you in heaven.” So much for trying to script a confession of faith.

But obviously my friend had something which no prayer or public invitation can bestow. He had assurance of eternal life. The belief he had claimed was also accompanied by assurance of a future in heaven. As is true of everybody else who gets saved, assurance was of the essence of the faith that saved him.





# THE GOSPEL AND SPIRITUAL WARFARE:

## A REVIEW OF PETER WAGNER'S *CONFRONTING THE POWERS*<sup>1</sup>

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All those who are concerned for the content of the gospel should be equally concerned for the spread of the gospel. The purity of the good news of salvation is irrelevant if it is never preached, and therefore never heard and believed. It is precisely because the content of the gospel message is so precious and so liberating that Paul could affirm an OT thought, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace!" (Rom 10:15b, NKJV). But someone must bring the good news of eternal life if people are to receive it. The apostle further explained, "And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard?" (Rom 10:14b, NKJV).<sup>2</sup>

But unknown to many Christians, some missiologists are spearheading a movement to drastically change the way Evangelicals think about the spread of the gospel. These changes primarily regard the inclusion

<sup>1</sup> C. Peter Wagner, *Confronting the Powers* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Wagner, after quoting Rom 10:14, qualifies Paul's theology with his own: "There are exceptions, however, even today. Those of us who try to keep track of what God is doing in the world agree with each other that never before have we seen or even heard of so many conversions through divine intervention ... particularly among Muslims." The author further explains that Jesus or an angel has appeared to others, and some have experienced God through auras of light, voices, dreams, or daytime visions. Bibles have supernaturally appeared in mosques or Muslim homes. On one occasion, a Muslim was physically transported by supernatural power from her home to a church where she received Christ (p. 186).

of new approaches to spiritual warfare as essential elements for world evangelism methodology.

Spiritual warfare is unquestionably a biblical concept. Every Christian wrestles against personal but invisible, wicked forces (Eph 6:12). Yet a large portion of modern spiritual warfare teaching derives its theology from empirical data and unbiblical sources. Combining evangelism and world missions methodology with these forms of spiritual warfare philosophy poses serious problems. Its hidden dangers lie in how some spiritual warfare teachings entice Christians into forms of "Christian spiritism" and other highly questionable practices. At the same time, valuable human resources for spreading the gospel may be misused so that the gospel itself is not preached.

These alarming trends are evident in Peter Wagner's most recent book, *Confronting the Powers*. Are such stringent criticisms fair and honest against well-intentioned people like Wagner whose hearts long for reaching the world for Christ? Our intentions are to substantiate this criticism in the following review.

## I. Background and Purpose of the Book

### A. Wagner, and the A. D. 2000 and Beyond Movement

*Confronting the Powers* is a shrewd apologetic to counter recent criticism of the author's strange approaches to world evangelization and prayer for the lost.<sup>3</sup> Peter Wagner, for years a leading expert in church

<sup>3</sup>We refer to Wagner's book as a "shrewd" apologetic because of his disarming style and approach. The reader is dissuaded from critical analysis of the book's content by 1) spiritual claims to be following God's will even against personal desires, together with an insistence on refraining from polemical arguments (p. 34); 2) misleading citations of other scholars; and 3) the failure to footnote any scholars who *oppose* his teachings. As a result of point 3, the reader is exposed only to authors and books that tend to support strategic-level spiritual warfare. The verifiability of Wagner's representation of his opponents is impossible. As an example of point 2 above, Wagner cites Colin Brown that Jesus was not exercising His deity in doing miracles, but was fully dependent on the Spirit. Immediately following, Wagner remarks, "This is such a crucial issue for power ministries, including strategic-level spiritual warfare today, that I want to make sure *what Colin Brown and I have said* is very clear" (p. 129, italics added). His next sentences then argue for doing miracles greater than even Jesus, based on John 14:12. The reader is left with the impression that Brown holds to power ministries and agrees with Wagner's charismatic interpretation of John 14:12.



growth, is currently coordinator for the United Prayer Track of the A. D. 2000 and Beyond Movement. The A. D. 2000 and Beyond Movement, now headed by Luis Bush, has unofficially taken the baton of world evangelization from the first (1974) and second (1989) Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization.

According to his own testimony, Wagner accepted his new responsibilities as coordinator for the United Prayer Track on the one condition that he be allowed to continue his work with the Spiritual Warfare Network. Wagner's summary is interesting: "Luis Bush readily agreed, realizing ahead of time that this would attach the whole A. D. 2000 Movement to some of *the more radical forms of praying for the lost with which some were experimenting*" (italics added).<sup>4</sup>

## B. Radical New Strategies for Evangelism

Wagner believes that God has given "strategic-level spiritual warfare" to the Church as the greatest power boost for worldwide evangelism since William Carey's pioneering missionary endeavors. This "new spiritual technology," as Wagner dubs it, involves much more than casting demons out of people (which he refers to as "ground-level spiritual warfare"). It involves even more than aggressively confronting stronger demonic powers propagating the occult (which he labels "occult-level spiritual warfare"<sup>5</sup>). Strategic-level spiritual warfare incorporates the direct confrontation of territorial spirits—demons believed to be controlling geographical regions in order to dominate people groups. But the new methodology also incorporates other novel strategies such as "spiritual mapping," "identificational repentance," and "prophetic acts." Spiritual mapping is a strategy to "map out" the demons' geographical activity with the help of individuals who, according to Wagner, have "gifts of prophetic espionage" or a spiritual "hunting instinct to track down the enemy's manipulations."<sup>6</sup> This strategy also includes learning the names of controlling demons who manipulate political figures or inflict social oppression. Spiritual mapping incorpo-

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. Wagner is well aware of the terms he has used here. One major unit of the first chapter is entitled, "Radical Varieties of Prayer." "Experimentation" is also a common word he applies to strategic-level spiritual warfare (e.g., pp. 20, 27, 33–34, 152).

<sup>5</sup> The author admits elsewhere (p. 136) that this is an artificial distinction and cannot be recognized in Jesus' ministry or teachings.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 30.

rates "overt and systematic attempts to discover the devices of Satan,"<sup>7</sup> with the goal of praying more effectively against Satan's control of those without Christ.

Identificational repentance involves Christian confession of the sins of a non-Christian people group so as to help "get to the roots of any present-day social and spiritual sicknesses" that prevent the reception of the gospel.<sup>8</sup> Prophetic acts are public displays styled after the ministries of the OT prophets, intended for the purpose of community evangelization. It is implied (at least by the author's illustrations from history<sup>9</sup>) that, like the prophets of old, we should challenge demons head-on by destroying pagan shrines and idols. Legal and ethical ramifications of such practices are altogether ignored.

### C. An Overview of the Content of the Book

Two major divisions outline the contents of the book. After tracing in an introductory chapter the development of spiritual warfare and prayer (and the controversy it has evoked), the author takes a chapter each to evaluate the issues of hermeneutics, epistemology, and history. A second division attempts to argue from the biblical evidence. Wagner examines the ministries of Jesus, Peter, and Paul for evidence to sup-

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 237. "What an Xray is to a surgeon, spiritual mapping is to an intercessor" (p. 236).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 31. "When white Americans adequately repent of the slave trade, healing of racism will begin. When Japanese repent of bombing Pearl Harbor, the grip of the Sun Goddess will loosen. When Christians repent of the Crusades, doors will be opened for the evangelization of Muslims and Jews. These are only a few examples of pulling down strongholds ... on the current Spiritual Warfare Network agenda" (p. 239). This theology raises insurmountable questions. Is the gospel itself impotent to penetrate a culture and bring significant conversions? To what degree is the knowledge of distant history, e.g., the Crusades, and the repentance of history's inhumanities crucial for the success of the gospel? Could there be other widespread atrocities done to Muslims and Jews that prevent their acceptance of the gospel, yet about which Christians are lamentably ignorant? Is it sufficient if European Christians repent of the Crusades, or are American Christians also responsible? Must the Roman Catholic Church also repent, since the Crusades took place under her auspices?

<sup>9</sup> E.g., Wagner cites a story about Boniface, an eighth century English missionary sent to Germany by Pope Gregory II. The missionary cut down an oak tree held sacred for worship of the pagan god, Thor. The success of this power encounter, says Wagner, opened the way for the reception of the gospel (p. 111).



port his strategic-level spiritual warfare. Final chapters focus on the same teachings in the record of the church at Ephesus, and the teachings of other epistles. An appendix explains the philosophy of prayer for world evangelization written by Wagner and adopted by the A. D. 2000 United Prayer Track.

#### D. Charismatic Presuppositions to Spiritual Warfare

Behind Wagner's approach to spiritual warfare for world outreach is an unrelenting commitment to "power evangelism"—the need for signs and wonders to promote the gospel. Wagner's self-confessed mentor is John Wimber,<sup>10</sup> founder of the Vineyard Church and leader of the Signs and Wonders movement (also known as the Third Wave, and recently identified with the Toronto Blessing<sup>11</sup>). Cessationism (the doctrine that some spiritual gifts ceased at the end of the apostolic age) is regularly criticized, since in Wagner's view God is still communicating to the believer through audible voices, visions, dreams, prophets, personal appearances, and the gift of discerning spirits.

This contention is supported by a distinction he wishes to find between two Greek words: the *logos* of God (the written Word) and the *rhēma* of God (God's speaking directly to the believer today).<sup>12</sup> Wagner also claims he came into the charismatic experience through a *rhēma*. After suffering from incurable headaches, he was healed once and for all:

Then in 1983, John Wimber received a *rhēma* word from God that the root cause of my headaches had been a demon and that I was to drive it out myself rather than ask someone else to do it for me. I obeyed. I cast out the demon in the name of Jesus, and I have not suffered any such headaches since that day.<sup>13</sup>

Absolutely no exegetical backing is given for the *logos/rhēma* dichotomy except to quote a verse where each Greek word is used. This misuse of Scripture is inexcusable for one who claims biblical scholarship.<sup>14</sup> Most often, *logos* and the *rhēma* are used synonymously in the

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>11</sup> For an overview of the outbreak of "holy laughter" and the Toronto Blessing, see James A. Beverley, "Toronto's Mixed Blessing," *Christianity Today* (September 11, 1995): 22–27.

<sup>12</sup> Wagner, *Powers*, 52–55, 62, 64, 155.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>14</sup> Elsewhere Wagner makes such claims: "During the last three decades I have developed a degree of expertise in the field of spiritual gifts" (p. 96).

Greek NT.<sup>15</sup> Even a quick scan of a Greek concordance will verify that *rhēma* is not used of God's direct communication to the believer in voices or dreams. Whatever study Wagner has done, he has overlooked the well-known exhortation from the lips of Jesus in Matt 4:4, "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word [Greek, *rhēma*] that proceeds from the mouth of God."

Since the word *logos* is not used in Jesus' statement, does Wagner believe that Christians are to live on every direct communication given to us personally by God? Is the written Word of God, Wagner's *logos*, excluded from the command? As a final touch to convince his readers, Wagner grossly inflates the opinion polls on his views: "I dare say that the standard-brand evangelical doctrine of '*logos* only' that we were taught might now find a place on an 'endangered doctrines' list, about to become extinct."<sup>16</sup>

One of the recent miracles that has been widely used to support charismatic teachings is the report of numerous Christians who have had their teeth filled supernaturally. Wagner, responding to criticism of these apparent miracles, writes:

For the last several years I have traveled frequently to Argentina and Brazil. I have talked to many people who have had their teeth filled by the power of God, including some who have had old bridges removed and replaced and some who have seen new teeth grow into places where former teeth have been extracted. I have personally looked into enough mouths and cross-examined enough people who have experienced divine dental work to be completely convinced, beyond any doubt, that this miracle has happened and is happening with considerable frequency in those two nations. Most mouths I have looked into in Brazil have had teeth miraculously filled—not with a white substance such as in Argentina, but with gold!<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> "Any difference of meaning between *logos* and *rhēma* would be only a matter of stylistic usage." *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, ed. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), §33.98.

<sup>16</sup> Wagner, *Powers*, p. 55. Wagner has many overstatements in his book. Consider his analysis of evangelical responses to power evangelism, divine healing, miracles, and casting out demons, since the early oppositions in the 1980s: "Strong voices that still object to these are now few and far between" (p. 33). Again, he exaggerates the role of his approach to spiritual warfare: "Beginning from the days of Jesus until now, every significant step for the Christian movement has been won through spiritual warfare" (p. 126).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

Personally, I find these reports far removed from the miracles of Jesus and the apostles in the Gospels and Acts. While I do believe that God is concerned with the minor details of our lives, I think Wagner has trivialized the miracle-powers of Christ. I don't see Jesus miraculously restoring broken fingernails and healing sprained ankles. If God wanted to heal, why would He fill teeth or repair old bridges? Why would He not completely restore the teeth so that no filling or bridge was necessary? But much more disturbing than Wagner's theology of healing is his epistemological basis for establishing the truth of these miracles.

## II. Theological, Biblical, and Historical Issues

### A. A Subjective and Relativistic Theology

Traditionally, Evangelicals have argued that experience and ministry ought to flow out of theology and Scripture. Wagner offers us a paradigm shift: theology must flow out of ministry (à la experience in exorcisms and healings)!<sup>18</sup> Correspondingly, emphasis is placed on subjective experience over the objective Word of God. Personal experience becomes the verifiable proof of new doctrines about the spirit world. Theology is defined as "a human attempt to explain God's Word and God's works in a reasonable and systematic way."<sup>19</sup> The paragraphs which follow this definition are given over to a discussion of the words *attempt* and *human*. In light of this, the charge of theological relativism does not seem to be an unfair assessment.

In one place, the author comments: "Much ministry experience has verified that this [a spirit of unforgiveness] is one of the major obstacles to personal deliverance and also to corporate or social deliverance on the strategic level."<sup>20</sup> Such statements may appear reasonable to many Christians. But establishing doctrine by the subjectivity of experience yields utterly contradictory results. Being of a charismatic persuasion, Wagner holds to speaking in tongues as a valid gift for today. Yet another veteran spiritual warfare counselor has determined, by addressing demons in Christians, that speaking in tongues is always a *counterfeit*

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 44, 53, 233. According to Wagner, even Paul's theology was rooted in his experience (p. 44).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 236.



gift.<sup>21</sup> Once removed from the scrutiny of the Bible, spiritual warfare experiences do produce a *human* attempt at theology. Wagner himself admits that it is best to be always tentative in one's conclusions in discerning knowledge of the invisible world.<sup>22</sup> Yet the majority of the book defends a certainty about the spirit world through experiential knowledge. For example, Wagner explains that through the gift of prophecy and the gift of the discernment of spirits, "we can *know* what has and what has not been bound in heaven" (*italics added*).<sup>23</sup> So while theology is a "human attempt" to describe truth, what we can really trust is experience and credible eyewitnesses.<sup>24</sup> This is a serious attack on evangelical epistemology.

In the book, the reader will find a wide array of speculative theology to support the author's radical strategic-level warfare. Very few of these innovative ideas are exegetically based.<sup>25</sup> A small sampling includes: 1) praying on location for a community, region, or nation is inherently more powerful than praying at home;<sup>26</sup> 2) demons working in the occult are significantly different in their strategies than those involved in demon possession and demand distinct warfare approaches to defeat them;<sup>27</sup> and 3) demons have two kinds of names—functional names and proper names.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>21</sup> C. Fred Dickason, *Demon Possession and the Christian: A New Perspective* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987), 144, 189, 193–97, 221. "This author has tested fifteen cases of tongue-speaking, fourteen from demonic spirits and one from psychological pressure" (p. 144). Cessationism verified by spiritual warfare experiences has no more validity than charismatic theology verified experientially.

<sup>22</sup> Wagner, *Powers*, 69.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 59–61.

<sup>25</sup> Exegesis is admitted to be founded unambiguously on assumption: "I am now going to make an assumption on which I base my interpretation of this scenario ... My assumption is that a territorial principality of some kind had been assigned by the evil one to keep Samaria in spiritual captivity" (p. 173. Cf. also pp. 178, 188–89).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 26–28.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.



### B. A Flawed Epistemology and Hermeneutic

In *Confronting the Powers*, spiritual warfare is handled like a Western social science involving case studies, innovative experimentation, and the gathering of data from all sources. Wagner writes:

Nevertheless, certain people such as shamans, witch doctors, practitioners of Eastern religions, New Age gurus or professors of the occult on university faculties are examples of the kind of people who may have much more extensive knowledge of the spirit world than most Christians have.<sup>29</sup>

Wagner would have us believe that all innovative methods involving spiritual warfare are amoral. As his defense for experimenting with new techniques for discovering the spirit realm, he cites the debates Christians have over amoral issues such as erecting church buildings, celebrating Christmas, using instruments for music in church, and preaching in stadiums.<sup>30</sup> Several times he mentions the first reactions to the Sunday School Movement as a parallel to the rejection of his new techniques.

The false assumption is made that every NT believer has authority over the demonic world and therefore can investigate and interrogate demons, sifting for profitable knowledge to advance God's kingdom. No mention is made of God's commands that seeking information from the spirit world is strictly prohibited. On the contrary, he advocates "first-hand research into the world of darkness" and chides those who are unwilling to listen to "independent expertise in demonology."<sup>31</sup> The Deut 29:29 instructions are violated: "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever ..."

Common among modern spiritual warfare advocates is a repeated criticism of Western Christianity's view of the supernatural.<sup>32</sup> Wagner

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 32, 79, 81, 85.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>32</sup> Timothy M. Warner, *Spiritual Warfare: Victory Over the Powers of This Dark World* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991), 26–27, 43, 59, 87, 115–16, 125, 130, 140; John Wimber, "Power Evangelism: Definitions and Directions," in *Wrestling with Dark Angels: Toward a Deeper Understanding of the Supernatural in Spiritual Warfare*, ed. C. Peter Wagner and F. Douglas Pennoyer (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1990), 37; Neil Anderson, "Finding Freedom in Christ," 128; Charles H. Kraft, "A Response to 'In Dark Dungeons of Collective Captivity,'" 272–73.

fits the characterization. In his view, the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century has maintained a dominant influence on Western Christians, limiting their worldview to a naturalistic outlook. This is regularly offered as the core reason why Western Christians, in their fight against demons, reject charismatic techniques (i.e., casting out demons, confronting territorial spirits, etc.). American Christians too readily verify reality by their five senses. The result is that Christians bring a rationalistic preunderstanding to their interpretation of Scripture.<sup>33</sup>

What we have here is the proverbial straw man. Most evangelical Christians *do* believe in demons, angels, and the supernatural—just not in Wagner's variety. Instead of Western Christians being blinded by rationalism, Wagner and other modern spiritual warfare teachers have been biased in their epistemology and hermeneutics by animism<sup>34</sup> and Western relativism. In attempting to take out a speck from the eye of American Christianity, spiritual warfare advocates may find a log in their own eye.<sup>35</sup> They themselves too readily verify reality by their five senses!

Recent trends in hermeneutics have tended to question all facets of Western thought, even the trend among Evangelicals to question the

<sup>33</sup> Wagner, *Powers*, 76–77.

<sup>34</sup> Animism is the precise criticism of Wagner and other strategic-level warfare specialists presented in Robert J. Priest, Thomas Campbell, and Bradford A. Mullen, "Missiologial Syncretism: The New Animistic Paradigm," in *Spiritual Powers and Mission: Raising the Issues*, ed. Edward Rommen, Evangelical Missiologial Society Series, no. 3 (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1995), 9–87. The response on behalf of radical spiritual warfare advocates is presented by Charles H. Kraft, "'Christian Animism' or God-Given Authority," 88–136. The dispute over recent developments in spiritual warfare is currently reaching its peak. Surprisingly, the debate has surfaced in missiologial circles more than in theological circles. Evidence of the debate may be found in the fact that the Evangelical Missiologial Society has published this entire special edition around the issue.

<sup>35</sup> Something near elitism appears in several of Wagner's statements, such as, "Charles Kraft and I both conclude that many of the differences in the way we interpret the Scriptures, in contrast to the way our critics interpret the same Scriptures, are that we have been able to distance ourselves further from the Enlightenment worldview than they have" (p. 77). "I was continually finding and teaching important things in Acts that the most popular commentators had scarcely mentioned ..." (p. 162). "None of the commentators I have yet read, however, had acquired professional expertise in both of those areas [power ministries and missiology]" (p. 163).



ability to interpret the Scripture with certainty.<sup>36</sup> Silva writes, "If there is anything distinctive about contemporary hermeneutics it is precisely its emphasis on the *subjectivity* and *relativity* of interpretation" (italics original).<sup>37</sup> Given the dramatic cultural shift in the West away from a rationalistic worldview, it is not difficult to see that Wagner has employed this culturally-prejudiced, anti-Western worldview that he has superimposed on Scripture. Although he is sensitive to this charge, his attempt to refute it is unavailing.

While a high view of Scripture is directly affirmed, the majority of *Confronting the Powers* renders such affirmations nugatory. Much of Wagner's teachings, which he argues are essential for victory over demons, is never found in the Bible. He freely admits this himself.<sup>38</sup> Other teachings are found in the Gospels but not in the Epistles (e.g., casting out demons). With these he contends that many of the things that the apostles taught or practiced do not need to be repeated in the Epistles because the apostles took these truths for granted. By this hermeneutic the author sidesteps progressive revelation, explaining away the unique role of the Epistles over the Gospels for the church age.<sup>39</sup>

The unique role of the apostles for the church age is also downgraded. It is acknowledged that the apostles would not have accepted anything that contradicted their OT Scriptures.<sup>40</sup> Still, Wagner feels that the apostles were open to new phenomena that the Holy Spirit wanted to do through them. The modern church should follow this apostolic model. But do all believers have authority equal to the authority of the

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Silva's comments in Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. and Moisés Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 234. Silva may be too blithe about the positive aspects of the developments of preunderstanding and reader-response in hermeneutics, and its stress on subjectivity (pp. 237, 243). Cf. Thomas's criticism of new hermeneutical romance with subjectivity in Robert L. Thomas, "Current Hermeneutical Trends: Toward Explanation or Obfuscation?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39 (June 1996): 255–56. Please see my review of this article in this issue of *JOTGES*.

<sup>37</sup> Silva, *Hermeneutics*, 241.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>39</sup> "This revelation of the purpose of God in Scripture should be sought primarily in its *didactic* rather than its *descriptive* parts...What is described in Scripture as having happened to others is not necessarily intended for us ..." (italics original). John R. W. Stott, *Baptism and Fullness of the Holy Spirit*, revised ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 6.

<sup>40</sup> Wagner, *Powers*, 81.



apostles for receiving new teachings? Can we now suspend Jude's teaching that the faith was once for all entrusted to the saints (Jude 3)? Has the clear teaching of Peter been set aside: "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness ..." (2 Pet 1:3, NIV)? Strategic-level spiritual warfare strikes at the very heart of the spiritual experience—the all-sufficiency of the Scriptures.<sup>41</sup>

Beyond this, we contend that strategic-level spiritual warfare does indeed contradict the Scriptures. It is biblically unclear that demons work within specific geographical territories. So little scriptural revelation exists to support this idea that it must be unessential for our successful victory over demons.<sup>42</sup> *Yet all of strategic-level warfare hangs on this teaching.* After quoting 2 Cor 4:3–4 regarding Satan's power to blind the minds of people so as to obstruct faith in the gospel, Wagner rallies us to pray against territorial spirits behind this demonic strategy. "I believe," he remarks, "that God has provided ways and means for His people to remove many of these obstacles to evangelization."<sup>43</sup> But this satanic strategy is not a blindness on people-groups, nations, or geographic domains, but on individuals—*every* individual outside Christ. We might even conclude, based on Wagner's theology, that if Jesus or Paul had identified the name of the leading territorial demon over the Jewish nation, they could have prevented the national rejection of the gospel!

<sup>41</sup> Often, the need for extrabiblical data is prepared for by questioning the sufficiency of the Bible to address the spirit world: "The Bible does not provide us with sufficiently clear evidence to prove either the point that Beelzebub *is* the same person as Satan, or that he is *not*" (p. 147, italics original). The supposed inadequacy of Scripture becomes the unconscious grounds for appeals for experimentation: "If we are not satisfied with the fruit of our current evangelistic activities, whatever they may be, strategic-level spiritual warfare might at least be worthy of some experimentation" (p. 152).

<sup>42</sup> "Daniel spoke of evil angels who exercised influence over Persia and Greece ... Although Paul showed a great deal of dependence on the book of Daniel for some of his terms and concepts ..., Paul himself never connected the powers of darkness with any specific country or territory." Clinton E. Arnold, *Powers of Darkness: Principalities and Powers in Paul's Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 99. Cf. also Priest et. al., "New Animistic Paradigm," 68–78. It is interesting to note that in Daniel, the names of these demons are not supplied.

<sup>43</sup> Wagner, *Powers*, 25.

### C. A Reconstructed History

Most of the chapter on history struggles to explain why so few examples can be gleaned from past centuries that support strategic-level warfare. One of the premier historical proofs for Wagner's spiritual warfare is the analysis of the history of the early church offered by Ramsay MacMullen in *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A. D. 100–400)*.<sup>44</sup> Wagner cites this work repeatedly.<sup>45</sup> According to Wagner's citations, MacMullen believes that Christianity conquered the Roman Empire in the first four centuries primarily by the demonstrations of power in casting out demons.

But MacMullen's work is cited in ways that disregard its purpose and scope, as well as its theology.<sup>46</sup> MacMullen specifically states that his intention is history, not theology.<sup>47</sup> Accordingly, he counts as converts those who come into the church from pagan backgrounds, regardless of their comprehension of Christian doctrine or previous Christian instruction. He freely admits that more "converts" came into the church by emotional experiences than any mental interaction with the historical facts of Christ and the Scriptures.<sup>48</sup> Miracles produced this new

<sup>44</sup> Ramsey MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100–400)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984). Wagner calls him a secular historian.

<sup>45</sup> Wagner, *Powers*, 51, 100–103, 105–106, 114–15, 220–22, 228, 230, 245.

<sup>46</sup> I do not consider myself an expert in church history. But in my best understanding of MacMullen's book, it appears to me to be basically historical deconstructionism. In his view of history, the early church fathers often distorted the facts, excluding historical elements that they perceived to be unprofitable for Christian progress (MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, 6–7). With this philosophy, the author can readjust historical sources and resulting conclusions. Theologically, the work is neither conservative nor evangelical. As a case in point, MacMullen doubts the literal conversion of Lydia's household as the book of Acts records. He concludes, "My doubt arises from knowing how few among those who listened to Paul anywhere really did believe ..." Therefore, "in the whole early church, more than a trivial portion at any given moment can have been Christian only in name, though among them no doubt belief often developed, in time, as a result of a person's going through the motions." According to MacMullen, the motives for doing so were primarily the social and material benefits (p. 107).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 3–4.



“faith” irrespective of doctrinal understanding, so that “the only thing that was believed in was some supernatural power to bestow benefits.”<sup>49</sup>

MacMullen looks at conversion quite broadly—and certainly not biblically. His definition excludes the necessity of faith in the death of Christ for one’s sins, even eliminating a need to generically comprehend the love of God.<sup>50</sup> He also allows for insincerity among the converted. The vast majority of Christian converts were “largely or totally ignorant of the simplest matters of doctrine, rarely or never attending church.”<sup>51</sup> MacMullen’s work is more accurately described as an account of how Christendom became the sanctioned religion of Constantine, than as an account of the spread of the true Church of Jesus Christ.<sup>52</sup> This is precisely why Wagner’s use of MacMullen is misleading. Wagner writes, “He [MacMullen] speaks of the tremendous *evangelistic* power that is accompanied with what I call strategic-level spiritual warfare, or what he calls ‘head-on confrontation with supernatural beings inferior to God’” (italics added).<sup>53</sup> In reality, Wagner’s form of evangelism (confrontation with Satan and demons) becomes more a Western spirit of competition than a biblical missiological outreach.<sup>54</sup>

After detailing an account of the apostle John’s ministry in Ephesus discussed by MacMullen, Wagner reminds us that the story is not in Scripture. But he quickly quotes MacMullen’s defense in using it as history.<sup>55</sup> What we are not told by Wagner is that the story originates in

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 19, 21, 107–108. MacMullen rejects what he calls the “generalizing” of conversion, which would result in all conversions being read historically as involving the desire to know God and receive eternal life. He views this process as an imposition of present culture on past history (p. 8).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 5. He also finds that secular and even pagan, occult practices were sometimes syncretized with Christian conversion.

<sup>52</sup> Even the title of the book, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, hints that MacMullen may not be concerned with the spread of the gospel in the evangelical sense. His chapter entitled, “Conversion by Coercion,” seeks to establish how Christians or the empire won converts by offering them food or money, which was said to be a major element in conversion (pp. 114–15). Anti-pagan legislation and the destruction of pagan temples and shrines were common.

<sup>53</sup> Wagner, *Powers*, 220.

<sup>54</sup> Note this spirit in what MacMullen observes for the period of history he is surveying: “So a campaign of demotion [of paganism] was under way.” MacMullen, *Christianizing*, 18.

<sup>55</sup> Wagner, *Powers*, 222.



the apocryphal Acts of John.<sup>56</sup> By appealing to MacMullen as his authority for power evangelism and strategic-level spiritual warfare, Wagner has once again failed to rely on the Scriptures as the true source of inspired information about the works of the apostles.

### III. Exegetical Issues

#### A. Christ and the Gospels

The second major portion of the book traces spiritual warfare in the life of Jesus and the apostles. Loosed from orthodox epistemological and hermeneutical moorings, Wagner provides us with an abundance of outré exegesis. Beelzebub (Matt 12:24, 27) is declared to be an inferior territorial demon, not Satan.<sup>57</sup> How does Wagner arrive at this interpretation? His answer: "The reason I have concluded that he is a principality under the command of Satan is that the consensus of written materials I have examined and of personal interviews I have conducted with experts about the occult lead me to that judgment."<sup>58</sup>

So then, Beelzebub, (the "strong man," or "strong woman"<sup>59</sup>) becomes symbolic of any territorial spirit that must be bound (Matt 12:29) or overcome (Luke 11:22). Wagner calls this interpretation the most important contribution "to the nuts and bolts of evangelism." Transferring the use of "overcome" (Greek, *nikaō*) in Luke 11 to Revelation 2–3, he is able to read into the command to be an overcomer a commission to engage in strategic-level warfare!<sup>60</sup> He fails to see that under such a definition, the vast majority of godly Christians for the entire history of the

<sup>56</sup> MacMullen culls his information from a variety of secular inscriptions and Christian documents. These include apocryphal works like the Acts of John (MacMullen, *Christianizing*, 26) and the Acts of Peter (p. 28), and a forged document called The Life of Porphyry, dating from the sixth century, but which MacMullen feels can be legitimately used to describe non-Christians won to the Church in the fourth century (pp. 86–88).

<sup>57</sup> Abaddon/Apollyon (Rev 9:11) and Wormwood (Rev 8:11) are also names of demons, not Satan. Wagner, *Powers*, 147.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>59</sup> Since Diana of the Ephesians is a territorial demon, demons must be female as well as male, concludes Wagner (p. 217).

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 142–45. "This [Luke 11:21–22] is a key text for understanding the concept that Jesus commissions us to do strategic-level spiritual warfare ..." (p. 145).

Church have miserably failed as overcomers. He also engages in the well-recognized hermeneutical blunder of totality transfer.<sup>61</sup>

Little objection can be raised with the fact that in the Gospels, Jesus experienced direct encounters with Satan and demons. But Wagner makes the unwarranted assumption that the example of Christ and His commands to the disciples to cast out demons, etc., are directly applicable to believers today. The application is made by appealing to two broad arguments: the commissioning of the 70 or 72 (Luke 10:1ff) and the Great Commission (Matt 20:18–20).

Of the former passage, Wagner feels Luke 10:19 confirms the fact that there are absolutely no limitations to the authority over the enemy that the Lord has given to believers: "Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you."<sup>62</sup> In his opinion, "we have the power to deal with the demonic forces through all levels of their hierarchy." But in the following sentence he unequivocally contradicts the force of the verse and his own commentary. "Confronting Satan at the very top might fall into another category."<sup>63</sup> Jesus, however, included Satan in the phrase, "all the power of the enemy," as is evident from His words in verse 18 ("I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning").<sup>64</sup> Wagner manipulates the verse to fit his theology.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1994), 181–82; Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 66.

<sup>62</sup> Wagner, *Powers*, 136–37, 166. "The question then becomes, did Jesus mean 'all' when he made this particular promise? I think he did" (pp. 136–37).

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>64</sup> Liefeld's comment is correct. "The ultimate implication of overcoming 'all the power of the enemy' is to be victorious over the chief enemy [i.e., Satan]..." Walter L. Liefeld, "Luke," in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelien (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), 8:939.

<sup>65</sup> It is also intractable to apply the force of the highly emphatic Greek statement "and nothing shall by any means hurt you" to every believer today in the way it was applied literally to the 70 or 72 specially appointed disciples. This unusual protection was undoubtedly given even to them only for this particular occasion. See John A. Martin, "Luke," *Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament Edition*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983), 233.

Concerning the Great Commission, Jesus supposedly transferred authority to His disciples, and through them to us.<sup>66</sup> But the Great Commission mentions nothing of a delegated authority. The reference to authority (Matt 28:18) is all-inclusive (“all authority”), belongs exclusively to Christ (“has been given to Me”), encompasses a lordship over good as well as evil angels (“in heaven”), and extends to all human rulers or kings (“and on earth”). The Church has no—and needs no—delegated authority to carry out her obligation to evangelize and disciple the world (28:19–20). What it has is the Holy Spirit; what it needs is obedience.

## B. The Apostles, Acts, and the Epistles

Five examples of strategic-level spiritual warfare are found by Wagner in the ministry of the apostles—two involving Peter, and three associated with Paul.<sup>67</sup> Wagner labors to explain why only five experiences can be found in the book of Acts if confronting territorial spirits is so indispensable for evangelism. The defense offered is that Luke avoids being overly repetitious, and allows the reader to assume that this pattern of demon-confrontation continued on many other occasions.<sup>68</sup>

Peter’s confrontation with Simon Magus (Acts 8:20–23), the former magician, is metamorphosed to imply that Peter engaged in strategic-level warfare. Wagner admits that an assumption must be constructed, and that no clear proof can be claimed for this interpretation.<sup>69</sup> The exegetical leap is made that since Simon exercised territorial influence, he must have been under the power of a territorial spirit.

Another strange hermeneutical principle employed by Wagner is his perception that behind a political encounter is a power encounter.<sup>70</sup> By this exegesis, Herod’s imprisonment of Peter (and James; Acts 12),

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 127–28, 138, 141–42, 159. Once again, turning to the Great Commission to bolster a so-called delegated authority from Christ to the believer is commonplace in spiritual warfare circles. Cf. Warner, *Spiritual Warfare*, 51–52, 58; Dickason, *Demon Possession*, 262, 300.

<sup>67</sup> Wagner, *Powers*, 163.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 189–90. Cf. also p. 214.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 175–76.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 177.



together with many other such incidents unrecorded by Luke, constituted Peter a veteran of strategic-level spiritual warfare.<sup>71</sup>

The apostle Paul not only experienced being "slain in the Spirit" on the road to Damascus, he was commissioned at this time to "build a ministry of strategic-level spiritual warfare into his future activities."<sup>72</sup> In his encounter with Bar-Jesus, the Jewish false prophet and sorcerer (Acts 13:6–12), Paul was defeating a territorial spirit. Mark's failure to continue in ministry (Acts 13:13) is explained by the hypothesis that the younger missionary took a dislike to high-level spiritual warfare.<sup>73</sup> But all of this can be maintained only by ignoring the fact that there is absolutely no mention of Satan or demons in the context.

Once again, Wagner stretches his exegetical conclusions and discovers the name *Python* for a territorial spirit defeated in the healing of the Philippian slave girl (Acts 16:16).<sup>74</sup> The Greek phrase is either *pneuma pythōnos* (Byzantine and Majority Texts, "a spirit of divination or prophecy,"<sup>75</sup> or "a spirit of Python"), or *pneuma pythōna* (UBS<sup>4</sup>, Nestle-Aland<sup>27</sup>, "a Pythonic spirit," "a divining spirit," or "a spirit, a Python").<sup>76</sup> No major translation (cf. KJV, NASB, NJB, TEV, RSV, NRSV, NKJV) favors rendering the phrase with a proper name.<sup>77</sup> The

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 180. Wagner confesses that he does not know what happened with James, who was martyred by Herod (p. 178). From the vantage point of Wagner's strategic-level warfare theology, it seems that the apostle James was not a veteran spiritual warfare specialist and not an "overcomer"! Additionally, Wagner holds that prayer was offered by the church only for Peter (Acts 12:5), not for James (p. 178).

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 186–87.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 190–95. As in the case of Mark, Wagner suggests that strategic-level warfare can get "messy" (pp. 169, 194). The impression left is that exorcism is an emetic.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 195–97. For Wagner, a better translation of Phil 4:3 would be "they did spiritual warfare on my behalf" (p. 179).

<sup>75</sup> S.v. *pythōn*, William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, translated by Walter Bauer, second ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 438.

<sup>76</sup> Metzger's textual commentary calls *pythōna* the more difficult reading, but why this is so is not explained. Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, corrected ed. (New York: United Bible Society, 1975), 448.

<sup>77</sup> Even translating with "Python" does not demand that the word be interpreted as a proper name of a territorial demon.

phrase seems simply to be idiomatic for a spirit of divination.<sup>78</sup>

Unknown to most Christians—and understandably so—Paul's greatest evangelistic success (Ephesus) and failure (Athens) relate to his use of (or failure to use) strategic-level spiritual warfare. Applying what resembles church-growth philosophy, Wagner understands the lack of converts at Athens as evidence that Paul used a wrong evangelistic method. The apostle failed to demonstrate the mighty Christian God in an open power encounter.<sup>79</sup>

At Ephesus, Paul had to wait for God's timing. He was not originally permitted by the Holy Spirit to enter Ephesus (Acts 16:6) because he was not yet fully prepared to do spiritual warfare.<sup>80</sup> When he did arrive, power encounters with Diana, the territorial spirit,<sup>81</sup> was the chief instrument of conversion.<sup>82</sup> Although in Wagner's view we cannot trust extrabiblical historical traditions like Peter's martyrdom or Thomas's ministry in India,<sup>83</sup> we can assume the veracity of the tradition about

<sup>78</sup> "In most languages there seems to be no reason to borrow the term 'Python,' since it may be readily misunderstood. It is both more meaningful and to some extent more accurate to translate 'a spirit of divination' or 'the spirit which caused her to foretell the future' or '... to tell what was going to happen.'" *Semantic Domains*, §12.48, §33.284–85. Originally, the word referred to the mythological dragon or snake which guarded the oracle of Delphi in central Greece. Since Apollo slew Python, the term was given to anyone who prophesied through the supposed inspiration of Apollo. F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, in *The International Commentary on the New Testament*, revised ed., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 312; D. H. Wheaton, "Python," in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas et. al., second ed. (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1982), 1003.

<sup>79</sup> Wagner, *Powers*, 206–207. Exactly why Wagner refuses to see that demonstrations of power often result in unbelief rather than belief is unexplainable. For this phenomenon in Christ's ministry, cf. Mark R. Saucy, "Miracles and Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (July–September, 1996): 304–306.

<sup>80</sup> Wagner, *Powers*, 208.

<sup>81</sup> The strange principle is used that the name of the chief god(s) of a city is also the name of the territorial demon(s).

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 209–17. Some qualifications are made by Wagner to this analysis. Paul actually defeated the territorial spirit, Diana, through ground-level and occult-level rather than through strategic-level spiritual warfare (pp. 212–13). Nevertheless, when Paul battled with "beasts" at Ephesus (2 Cor 15:32), he was taking on territorial spirits (pp. 209–10).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.



the apostle John from the apocryphal Acts of John. According to its testimony, John went into the temple at Ephesus and prayed against the goddess Diana and called upon the demons to flee. The altar crashed to pieces and half of the temple was destroyed.<sup>84</sup>

Regarding spiritual warfare in the Epistles, only a few comments can be made. Jude 9 is explained to be only an injunction against exceeding our authority over demons.<sup>85</sup> But when Wagner tells us that in rebuking demons, "it is appropriate to remind the devil...where he can go,"<sup>86</sup> can we really believe this is not a direct violation of Jude's warning to avoid reviling angels or demons? James's command to "resist the devil" (Jas 4:7) is taken as an offensive and aggressive invading of Satan's territory (i.e., rebuking Satan, casting out demons, etc.).<sup>87</sup> But the context of parallel passages where resisting the devil is mentioned opposes an offensive approach to spiritual warfare. To "resist [wicked spiritual forces] in the evil day" in Eph 6:13 is equated with standing firm (6:11, 13-14), and to resist Satan in 1 Pet 5:9 is qualified in the verse as remaining strong in our faith. Terminology that would lead us to take an offensive attack against Satan is completely absent.

#### IV. Conclusion

*Confronting the Powers* has little to commend it as theologically sound or practically edifying. Little or no mention is made of man's depravity, or his own blindness to truth. The failure of the gospel is always attributed to the demonic world. When the gospel is indirectly defined (and only two or three times does any definition at all appear), faith is barely mentioned. The gospel is explained as "repentance and allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior"<sup>88</sup> or "repenting and experiencing personal faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord."<sup>89</sup> According to Wagner, accepting Christ is what James meant by submitting to God (Jas 4:7).<sup>90</sup> For Wagner, binding the "strong man" (i.e., a territorial spirit) frees a person to accept Christ. Although he acknowledges that this is not evangelism, it is an essential preparation for evangelism.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 231-32.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 157.



One of the great dangers of “power evangelism” or “strategic-level spiritual warfare” is that it will rob the energies of Christians who could be legitimately praying for people to be won to Christ, or who could be the “beautiful feet” that carry the good news of forgiveness in Christ. Under Wagner’s spiritual warfare theology, Paul should have written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who do spiritual warfare!” I have rarely read an evangelical book in which I found myself in major disagreement with the author on every page. *Confronting the Powers* comes close.



# THE SUBTLE DANGER OF AN IMPRECISE GOSPEL

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## I. Introduction

As readers of *JOTGES* are fully aware, I am not in agreement with Lordship Salvation's view of the gospel. Yet there are issues (such as: the deity of Christ, inerrancy, the sanctity of marriage, and calling believers to holiness) on which we *do* find common ground. This article addresses one such shared concern: a concern for the nature of preaching today.

A number of Lordship Salvationists have decried the shallow preaching which is found in many churches today. In his book *No Place for Truth, Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?*, David Wells gives a sober warning: "Theology is disappearing."<sup>1</sup> Why is this happening? Because, Wells says, while "the great sin in fundamentalism is to compromise," "the great sin in evangelicalism is to be narrow."<sup>2</sup>

Os Guinness likewise decries the current state of affairs in evangelicalism today. In his book *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity*, Guinness describes what pastors are being taught today on how to be effective:

Look at church-growth literature and check for such chapters as "Portrait of the Effective Pastor." In one such best-seller, theology and theological references are kept to a minimum—little more than a cursory reference to the pastor's "personal calling" and to "God's vision for the church." The bulk of the chapter is taken up with such themes as delegating, confidence, interaction, decision making, visibility, practicality, accountability, and discernment—the profile of the thoroughly modern pastor as CEO.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth, Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 12.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>3</sup> Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 52-53.



He continues:

Small wonder that one eminent Christian leader returned home from a church-growth conference puzzled. There had been "literally no theology," he said. "In fact, there had been no serious reference to God at all."<sup>4</sup>

As these quotations show, lack of depth in preaching has received a fair amount of attention. However, the specific issue of lack of depth in gospel preaching has received much less attention.<sup>5</sup> This article is an attempt to address this important issue.

I must confess at the start that I am venturing outside my field here. Normally I write exegetical or theological articles. While this one certainly contains exegesis and theology, it has a sociological thrust. In this article I am evaluating transcripts of actual evangelical sermons preached around the United States within the past few years. Approximately 50 churches from a wide range of evangelical denominations and non-denominations were contacted for samples of evangelistic sermons. A number of them sent one or more messages. Parts of those sermons were transcribed and are cited verbatim in this article.

The sample of sermons received does not prove that X percent of pastors are imprecise concerning the gospel message. Not being a statistician I wouldn't try to establish precise statistics. However, the evidence clearly shows that there are many pastors and churches today which inadvertently are imprecise in their gospel preaching.

There are probably many reasons why this is so. Two prominent reasons are: 1) the conviction that one can reach more people in this way (believing that a clear gospel proclaimed from the pulpit would offend

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>5</sup> N.B. John MacArthur has a book that sounds like it deals specifically with the preaching of the gospel message, *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World*. However, Dr. MacArthur uses the term *gospel* in the broad sense of all truth revealed in Scripture: "*The gospel*—in the sense Paul and the apostles employed the word—includes all the revealed truth about Christ (cf. Rom 1:1-16; 1 Cor 15:3-11). It does not stop at the point of conversion and justification by faith, but embraces every other aspect of salvation, from sanctification to glorification," p. 122. And, when he does discuss how one obtains eternal life, his emphasis is on what *he* believes the message is, not on the gospel preaching found in many churches today (see, for example, the chapter entitled "The Sovereignty of God in Salvation," pp. 153-72).

many before they had a chance to be touched by the love of God flowing through the congregation), and 2) the belief that the way they communicate the gospel is, in reality, the clearest way to share it (after all, many gospel tracts have vague evangelistic appeals like "give your life to Christ," "commit yourself to Christ," "follow Christ," or "pray to receive Christ").

A third possible reason is the desire to avoid being needlessly offensive. More than ever before churches are drawing in people from many different denominations and groups, both within and outside of orthodox Christendom. A pastor friend of mine, for example, has people from over 25 different denominations or groups in his church. That makes it tough to preach evangelistically in a way that will be both clear on the gospel and not needlessly offensive to those present. It is sometimes difficult for a pastor to discern between being *needlessly* offensive and being *needfully* offensive (since the gospel itself often does offend). If he is not very careful, he may end up proclaiming an inoffensive, yet imprecise gospel.

My thesis is that there is a subtle danger today of compromising the gospel by proclaiming it in vague, imprecise terms.

If we are to be true to our calling, then we must preach the gospel clearly even though it necessarily offends some of our listeners. The alternative is that in some cases larger groups will attend, but many of those attending, including many of the previously well-grounded believers, will be or will come to be confused about the gospel.

I call this type of proclamation of the gospel "the imprecise gospel." The word *imprecise* is an adjective which means that something is "not precise," that is, "[not] exact, correctly and clearly stated."<sup>6</sup> The imprecise gospel is thus indefinite, inexact, vague.

For the sake of simplicity, let's say that a full articulation of the gospel includes three points: 1) the bad news that you are a sinner separated from God, 2) the good news that Christ died and rose again, securing the right to freely give you eternal life, 3) the condition of obtaining eternal life: faith alone in Christ alone. It is on this third point that the imprecise gospel presentation fails to communicate with precision.

For example, you would be proclaiming an imprecise gospel if instead of calling people to faith alone in Christ alone you told them that the condition of eternal life was any of the following: giving one's life to Christ, praying to receive Christ, making a leap of faith, trying Jesus,

<sup>6</sup> *Oxford American Dictionary*, comp. by Eugene Ehrlich, et al. (New York: University Press, 1980), s.v., "precise," 524.

committing your life to Christ, dying to self, becoming a disciple of Christ. The person hearing your presentation would know, if he believed your first two points, that he is a sinner and that Christ died and rose again for him. Yet he wouldn't know *precisely* what he had to do to receive this eternal life from Christ.

Therefore, *the imprecise gospel is a vague articulation of the gospel which is inoffensive to most people*. The average person who heard this gospel preached would say something like this, "My, didn't the pastor do a great job of preaching the gospel this morning!" If someone pointed out that the pastor failed to call people to faith in Christ for eternal life, he would be viewed by many as nit-picking.

We now turn to look at some specific examples of the imprecise gospel.

## II. The Imprecise Gospel

### A. What the Imprecise Gospel Includes

One pastor proclaiming the imprecise gospel closed an evangelistic message in this way:

You matter to Him. He gave up Jesus, His Son, to take your capital punishment, to set you free. But you've got to sign up. An interesting thing happened after the last two services. Lines of people took out bulletins, and they put a cross on the front of the bulletin, and they put a dotted line and they signed up. They came down ... and had ... me and others ... sign on as witnesses. They said they were going to take that program home and they were going to say that "this was the day that I signed up." So we were here for a long time after both previous services helping people sign on the dotted line and praying with them. You don't have to come down and do that. You're welcome if you'd like to do that and get it settled and have us witness that. But maybe you could talk with some friends that you know who have already signed up. Maybe you could do this later in the privacy of your own home. But friends, Christ has made available to you forgiveness and eternal life, but you've got to sign up. I pray that you will.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup>All quotations from sermons in this article are verbatim transcripts. I have not cited the pastors' names because I want the issue to stand out, not personalities. In some cases where the pastor mentioned someone's name, they have been left out to preserve anonymity.



In another evangelistic sermon this same preacher said:

Christianity is not for the faint of heart. Can't you see the role of risk-taking in becoming a Christian? Can't you see why theologians have said for hundreds of years that even when a seeker is convinced of the facts surrounding Christianity, he still must take a leap of faith in order to receive Christ personally? You must come to that decision point and then commit to Christ even though the full implications of the commitment aren't all understood. You see why the Bible talks so much about faith. [You see] how to become a Christian you have to take a step of faith. Heb 11:6 says "Without faith it is impossible to be pleasing to God."

Without taking a spiritual risk you won't get to first base in Christianity. Now it's not blind faith. It's not blind risk. It's not roulette. It's a reasonable faith. It's a reasonable leap of faith. It's a reasonable risk that you're taking, but a risk nonetheless. Many of us have taken the risk and have been very richly rewarded for having done so, because Christ has come in as He said He would in that verse and He's changed our lives, changed our eternities. We're very glad.

But I want to ask before we move any further, how many of you have taken this first essential risk and received Christ into your life personally? When was it? Ask yourself. When did you open the door? Did you really do it? Has Christ come in?

Are there proofs of His presence in your life? Can people who are close to you affirm the fact that Christ is in your life because the evidences are ample and everywhere? Or might it be more true that some of you are standing with your hand on the knob, wanting to open the door, needing to open it, but hesitating because you just don't feel like you can take that risk? Well, I and every other believer in heaven and on earth are rooting for you today to take the risk. Take the risk. See what happens. Trust God in this. Open the door. You won't regret it. But if you think there's a way that you can become a Christian without taking the risk, without just opening the door and seeing what happens, you'll never become a Christian. Becoming a Christian involves risk-taking.

Another minister proclaiming the imprecise gospel said that there are three steps to becoming a Christian:

Millions believe Jesus in their heads, but it hasn't dropped into their hearts. It is a mental exercise...Millions believe in Jesus, but don't believe He's God...You have to believe in the deity of Jesus Christ in order for the first step to come true. John 8:24. Believe that Jesus is God.

The second aspect of being a Christian means to receive Jesus Christ into your heart as Lord and Savior. It's not just believing, but you have to receive Jesus into your heart...

The third step is following and adhering to Jesus Christ. It's not just enough to make a decision 15 years ago. He's not interested with how many start with Him. He's interested with how many finish with Him. John 8:31-32. John 10:4...

What is a Christian? A Christian is someone who believes, has received, and follows, adheres to. That's what a Christian is.

A pastor from Pennsylvania closed an imprecise evangelistic message with these words:

Humbly fall on your face, acknowledge your sin, and change your thinking about God. Say, "I'm willing to follow You, submit to You, give ownership of my life to You." Become a Christ-follower.

The same pastor closed another imprecise evangelistic sermon in this way:

Simply say, "God, you be the God of my life. I will no longer be the god of my life. I desire to receive Christ as my Savior. I want Him to control my life. And I reap all the benefits because of that."

In a sermon entitled, "Can I Be Confident I'll Go to Heaven?," a Kentucky pastor said:

Heaven is promised to those who accept Christ as their Savior and have yielded their life to Him as Lord...If you can't say that if you were to die you would go to heaven, you need to think about that. The first step is to accept Him as Savior and Lord of your life. To be obedient to His commands and example...That means you say, "I'm not going to trust myself anymore. I'm going to put full confidence in Him."

In a *Leadership Journal* forum on "Seekers or Saints: The Church's Conflict of Interest," a pastor from Washington State said, "I'll tell them, 'Hey, if you're sleeping with someone other than your wife, you aren't going to make it. Read 1 Corinthians 6. I sure love you, but you are not going to make it.'"<sup>8</sup>

Later in the forum a pastor from Chicago spoke about evangelism. Here's how he chose to articulate an evangelistic appeal: "Have you ever made a commitment to Christ?"<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> "Seekers or Saints: The Church's Conflict of Interest," *Leadership Journal* (Fall 1991), 16.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 22.

I am disturbed by this sort of appeal. Even more disturbing to me is that many believers are *not* disturbed when they hear or read these things. I fear we have become so immersed in the imprecise gospel and in the toleration of our age that we are only offended when someone comes out and blatantly contradicts the gospel.

There are a number of recurring appeals I found in the evangelistic sermons I analyzed:

- Accept Christ as your Savior and Lord
- Repent of your sins
- Follow Christ
- Commit your life to Christ
- Submit your life to Christ
- Turn your life over to Christ's control
- Receive Christ as Savior and Lord
- Give your heart to Jesus.

You may notice that these are common evangelistic appeals today. Often we would call these "popular" appeals. And that is my point. The imprecise gospel is one which is popular. It has wide appeal. It is vague enough that most people feel comfortable with it.

The imprecise gospel is distinctive both in the *vague expressions it uses* and in the *clear expressions which it does not use*. Let's consider what the imprecise gospel excludes.

## B. What the Imprecise Gospel Excludes

The imprecise gospel tends to exclude anything which is likely to divide or offend a significant number of people. Missing are expressions such as "Lordship Salvation," "Free Grace Salvation," "cheap grace," or "easy believism." Commitment and obedience *are not renounced* as conditions of salvation. In fact, as shown above, commitment and obedience are normally held up as *requirements* of salvation. While the imprecise gospel sometimes speaks of salvation by faith, it doesn't usually speak of salvation by faith *alone*.

Faith is not normally defined as a conviction that the testimony of God is true, or as simple trust. Instead, when explained, faith is often pictured as a blind leap and as a risky venture. Faith to some is not certainty, but uncertainty!



I am not suggesting that unless a pastor corrects false understandings of the gospel he cannot be clear on the gospel. Of course, a person can clearly articulate the gospel without directly confronting false views of it. However, while a preacher might not do this in *every* presentation of the gospel, he surely should do so in some, if not many. Otherwise he leaves the flock vulnerable to those who would mislead them (radio and TV preachers, tracts and books, well-meaning friends, etc.). What I am suggesting here is that the imprecise gospel does *not* clear up major misconceptions on the conditions of eternal life. For example, if a pastor preaches against the need to do good works in order to be saved, stay saved, or even prove you're saved, that the only condition is faith in Christ, then he is no longer proclaiming the imprecise gospel. Though he may have been imprecise in his evangelistic preaching to that point, at that point he is precise.

### III. Applications

It is unwise to settle for something less than the clearest presentation of the only saving message there is. The gospel cannot be sacrificed on the altar of pragmatism (Gal 1:6-9). Besides, ultimately, the truly pragmatic thing to do is always to please God.

#### A. Application to Pastors and Evangelists

Make the gospel a non-negotiable in your ministry. Preach the gospel clearly and often. Call people to faith alone in Christ alone. Tell them that commitment, following Christ, and turning from sins are not conditions of eternal salvation, but of discipleship, progressive sanctification, and eternal rewards. Tell them that if a person is trusting even in part in such things, then he is not truly believing in Christ for eternal life.

Don't offend people needlessly. There is no reason to use poor grammar, to dress in a way that turns off your audience, or to ridicule and harangue. However, do offend people needfully. Just make sure that it is the gospel that offends, and not you.

Be willing to resign or be fired over the gospel issue. The alternative is much worse than unemployment, since compromising the gospel message is a grievous thing to God (Gal 1:6-9).

Take a stand regarding church membership and the gospel. Don't tolerate a situation where people can be members of your church and yet not believe the gospel of grace.<sup>10</sup>

Don't let anyone fill your pulpit who holds to Lordship Salvation, even if he would agree not to talk about the gospel. To have a famous Lordship Salvation preacher in your pulpit might be a good move in terms of publicity. It might help church growth. However, you would be sending a message to your church and community that the theology of this famous Lordship Salvationist is all right. Many people in your church would buy his books and listen to him on the radio with confidence that he is an orthodox teacher. If someone who proclaims a false gospel is under the anathema of Gal 1:8-9, we must stay away from him just as if he had the plague.

### **B. Application to Church Leaders**

All that I said to pastors above applies to you as well.

In addition, don't let your pastor twist in the wind on the gospel. Get out there with him. Take the heat he takes. Stand firm as a united group for the clarity of the gospel.

Until he went to the mission field, a friend pastored a large church in Colorado. One day a fellow pastor in his city encouraged him to co-sponsor an evangelist who was coming to town. My friend happened to know that the evangelist he mentioned preaches Lordship Salvation. He went to his elder board and told them of his reservations. All agreed that the church shouldn't co-sponsor the evangelist. In fact, they decided to send a letter to the other church detailing their concerns. The other church took offense and fired back a letter rebuking my friend and his elders for being negative and mean-spirited.

<sup>10</sup> Of course, this can be difficult. Being a leader in the church is the hardest job there is. What does one do with someone who is not clear on the gospel, yet who believes himself to be a Christian and who will be offended if you exclude him because of his view of the gospel? I would recommend doing the same thing you would do if the person didn't believe another of the fundamentals of the faith, such as the deity of Christ. I recommend having a doctrinal statement. One requirement of membership could be agreement with that statement. One who didn't agree could attend, but not join. Otherwise you end up giving people the impression that everything is negotiable, even one's view of the gospel itself.

My friend's church ended up being one of the few conservative evangelical churches in his town that didn't sponsor the evangelist and they lost about a hundred members as a result of their lack of participation. Interestingly, however, shortly afterwards they actually gained several hundred new members, more than making up for the numerical and financial loss.

The elders at my friend's church really stood by him. Since they all shared a burden for the clear gospel, they acted in the only way they felt they could. The fact that some people ended up leaving their body didn't make them wish they had acted differently. While they were sorry that people left, they were glad that the reason was a difference of conviction over the gospel and its importance.

Make sure that you keep the gospel foremost in your hiring practices, whether for senior pastor, youth pastor, director of Christian education, administrative pastor, or church secretary. Don't accept any addition to the church staff who isn't clear on the gospel, regardless of how gifted they are or how much charisma they may have.

Keep up on the gospel debate yourself. Read widely. Don't rely on somebody else to know the issues. When speaking at a church in Pennsylvania recently, I stayed in the home of one of the elders. In the course of our conversations I learned that he subscribes to several journals (ours included) and that he reads widely on the gospel issue.

I was impressed that he took such pains to stay up on the gospel debate. He feels it is his responsibility as a leader of the church to be informed so that he can lead properly. He is absolutely right. The spiritual well-being of the church should not rest solely in the hands of the senior pastor and the paid staff. *All* of the leaders of a church are responsible for the spiritual life of the body.

Bring in Free Grace speakers to conduct conferences and seminars and to fill the pulpit when the pastor is out of town.

Encourage the flock to read Free Grace literature.

Share the gospel clearly yourself and teach others to do the same.

### C. Application to the Church Body

You may not be able to vote in the leadership meetings or have a direct say in who is hired or what is done in your church. However, you can make your voice heard. Let the pastor and church board know what you think, and not only when things go wrong. If the pastor preaches a clear gospel message, let him and the board know how much that means to you. Notes of encouragement can really make a pastor's day.



Keep up with the issues. Stay informed. Tell the leaders of your church about good books, journals, and commentaries you are reading. A number of *JOTGES* subscribers give the GES journal and GES material to leaders of their church.

Share the gospel clearly yourself and disciple others to do the same.

#### D. Summary

Make clear gospel proclamation a non-negotiable for you. Be clear on the gospel yourself and teach others to be as well. Don't let a desire to be a part of a large congregation lead you to become less clear or even unclear on the gospel. Nothing is worth that.

### IV. Objections Answered

#### A. But Didn't Paul Become All Things to All Men?

Yes, he did. The apostle Paul said: "I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor 9:22).

What, however, did Paul mean when he said that he became "all things to all men"? He makes that clear in the entire context:

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without the law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men that I might by all means win some.

Becoming all things to all men for Paul meant he gave up his liberty (in the context, his right to be paid) whenever doing so would help him proclaim the gospel to people. Let's take, for example, the issue of circumcision. Circumcision is not required for salvation or for Christian growth. However, when Paul was in Derbe and Lystra, he had Timothy circumcised "because of the Jews who were in the region, for they all knew that his father was Greek" (Acts 16:3). He didn't want the fact that Timothy was uncircumcised to keep Jews from hearing the gospel message.

Yet, on a different occasion, Paul refused to have another coworker circumcised. Legalists in Jerusalem were urging him to have Titus circumcised. "Yet not even Titus who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised" (Gal 2:3). Why not? "That the truth of

the gospel might continue with you" (v 5). The reason the legalists wanted Titus to be circumcised was so that Titus could be saved—and so that their view of the gospel could be validated and promoted among the Gentiles. Thus the very gospel was at stake. Hence, on that occasion Paul refused to accommodate. Accommodation was always *for* the gospel, never *against* it.

Becoming all things to all men does have application regarding the words a preacher chooses to use with his audience. He will want to avoid using words which hinder the audience's ability to understand and believe the gospel. This would mean that a preacher should avoid using words that are coarse or inappropriate. He will want to avoid gestures which might offend. He will want to use illustrations that speak to that audience. All of these things are especially difficult to observe when preaching cross-culturally. Accommodation of this type is Pauline.

However, when a pastor preaches an imprecise gospel, he is not becoming "all things to all men that [he] might by all means save some." Instead, he is altering the actual message of the gospel. This the apostle Paul would not do (Gal 1:8-9).

Paul articulated his message in various ways. He used a different approach when he preached to the Athenian philosophers at Mars Hill (Acts 17:22-31) from when he preached to a Jewish audience in a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16-41). However, he always shared the same message. His gospel was always by grace through faith, apart from works, lest anyone should boast. The sole condition of eternal salvation, according to Paul, is believing in Christ for it: "However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all long-suffering, as a pattern to those who are going to *believe on Him for everlasting life*" (1 Tim 1:16). Paul did not preach an imprecise gospel of salvation by commitment, surrender, following Christ, or making Christ Lord of one's life.

While Paul tried to avoid offending anyone needlessly, he offended a lot of people needfully. Paul may well have experienced more persecution as a result of his preaching than any other preacher ever (cf. 2 Cor 11:22-33).

### **B. Does a Solid Free Grace Pastor Have Any Cause for Concern?**

Yes, he does. Any pastor, including those who solidly hold to the Free Grace view of salvation, is subject to the subtle danger of being imprecise in his gospel preaching.

In the Book of Galatians, a book warning against defection from the gospel, Paul reports an incident in which two apostles, Peter and Barnabas, temporarily acted in a manner inconsistent with the gospel:

Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed; for before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. And the rest of the Jews also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy ... *I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel ...* (Gal 2:11-14, italics added).

Surely if apostles could fail to be straightforward about the truth of the gospel, so could anyone. Pastors who firmly believe in God's grace are subject to strong, if subtle, pressure to avoid offending people with their gospel preaching. While the following comment about pastors is not specifically about pressures on them regarding gospel preaching, its application is obvious:

[There is] a heavy weight on the pastor's shoulders. Consider the implications. *If the church grows*: It needs to keep growing, and any false move by the pastor can bring it to a halt. The pressure is on. *If the church fails to grow*: "Why, it's the pastor's fault, since leadership is primary. So, what's wrong with our pastor?"<sup>11</sup>

It is naive to think that pastors won't feel this pressure and that this pressure won't, at least in some cases, have an impact on their gospel preaching. This can lead to two negative consequences for the Free Grace pastor: he may begin preaching the gospel less often and he may begin preaching it less clearly.

All pastors are faced with this question: How can I attract and keep enough visitors to keep our church growing? Approximately 20% of people in America today move each year. Thus a church of 100 needs 20 new members a year not to grow, but just to stay the same size. A church of 400 needs 80 new members just to break even.

It is possible to call people to faith alone in Christ alone and yet at the same time avoid offending people holding to a *mild form* of Lordship Salvation. Doing so requires a decrease in frequency and clarity in evangelistic messages.

<sup>11</sup>James Berkley, "Church Growth Comes of Age," *Leadership Magazine* (Fall 1991): 113.



For example, assume some members of the audience believe that saving faith includes obedience, surrender, and turning from sins. They think they are saved in part because they are obeying God. If the pastor merely preaches that salvation is by faith, these people can retain their legalistic thinking. Even if the pastor preaches that we are saved by faith *alone*, such people may still fail to understand or believe the gospel.

Only if the pastor confronts the issue of Lordship Salvation (with or without mentioning it by name) can he make the gospel clear for people confused by legalism. The pastor needs to explain that saving faith is simply the conviction that the gospel is true, that Jesus Christ gives eternal life to those who believe in Him for it. Faith is not commitment, obedience, surrender, or turning from sins. Faith doesn't even necessarily result in those things. Faith is simply a conviction that the gospel is true.

Since many people are confused in this way, it is important to clear up this confusion. Otherwise, many will be left confused—especially since many in Christendom today get more teaching outside of the church (Bible studies, Christian radio and TV, Christian books, Christian Web Sites on the Internet, etc.) than they do in the church.

Huebel points out that “the [church growth] movement studiously avoids any distinctive theology which might limit its universal appeal.”<sup>12</sup> While he was speaking of *literature*, his point also applies to *gospel preaching*.

One of the sermons I evaluated did promote a faith-alone view of the gospel; yet it was not clear on the gospel. It illustrates what I am talking about here.

The church sent its doctrinal statement along with two sermons. Here's what they say about salvation in their doctrinal statement:

Salvation is a gift from God to man. Man can never make up for his sin by self-improvement or good works. Only by trusting in Jesus Christ as God's offer of forgiveness can man be saved from sin's penalty. Eternal life begins the moment one receives Jesus Christ into his life by faith.

While that statement is reasonably clear on the gospel, the sermon which the church sent was not. As you read over excerpts from this pastor's

<sup>12</sup> Glenn Huebel, “The Church Growth Movement: A Word of Caution,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* (July-October 1986): 166.

sermon, notice how he is very vague as to what specifically one must do to be saved:

To know where we stand, we have to take a four-step process ...

1) The first step we have to take to know where we stand in the eyes of God is we have to realize that God loves us and He offers us a wonderful plan for our lives that is abundant and eternal ... You are a much loved person ... You matter to God ... [Here he quotes and briefly comments on John 10:10].

2) The second step of knowing where you stand in the eyes of God concerns something called sin... Our sins have separated us from God and the wonderful plan He offers. The reason most people are not experiencing the abundant life, the reason most people don't have their eternity secured is the fact that they are sinners and their sins have created a Grand-Canyon-like chasm between themselves and God ... [Here he quotes and briefly comments on Isa 59:2, Rom 3:23, and Rom 6:23] ... Man has tried to bridge the gap through good works, through religion, through philosophy ... We still [all] fall miserably short.

3) [The third step is that] God sent Jesus Christ to become our Bridge over troubled waters. Jesus lived a perfect life, a sinless life ... Jesus died on the cross for all of our sins. He is the bridge over the troubled waters ... And it is something that no one here deserves. [Here he quotes and comments on 1 Pet 3:18 and John 14:6].

4) The fourth step is, it's my choice. I either walk across the bridge and I have eternal life [or I don't and I won't]. I know Jesus Christ. I have meaning, power, purpose. The person of the Holy Spirit is put inside my life. I have direction, a clear conscience, if I walk across the bridge. So my question is, which side are you on? ... You've got to take those one, two, three, four steps to become a Christian, to have eternal life. To more or less crystallize what I'm talking about, I want you to look at the screen behind me and listen to the words of a person I had the privilege of talking to, and he's going to tell you about crossing the bridge:

At this point a testimony of the one of the members of the church was played on video on a large screen behind the pastor. It culminated with the following:

My dad asked me how did I feel becoming a Christian? And I could remember a movie about Indiana Jones and his search for the Holy Grail. At the end of the movie he had to pass through three gauntlets to get to the grail. The third gauntlet found him at the foot of a huge cavern. And on the other side was the grail and there was no apparent way to get to it. And I remember Indiana Jones praying for a way to

get across and he put his foot out and when he put his foot down and took this leap of faith, a bridge appeared underneath his feet and he walked across and he got the grail.

So I said to my dad, that reminded me of when I was with the pastor in his car ready to accept Christ and searching for the bridge. And I took that leap of faith and that's what it was for me. I would encourage anybody who is in my position to take that leap of faith and walk across the bridge.

When the video ended, the pastor began speaking again. He came to the point in his message where he was giving his evangelistic appeal:

I'm asking you, empowered by the Holy Spirit of God, to walk across the bridge, to take those four steps ... I believe, to the best of my ability. I don't understand it all. There's questions I still have, folks. It's by faith. But God doesn't want us to check our intellect at the door. It's our choice. I pray that you will obey the Word of the Lord ... if you will take the step and walk across the bridge. One more time, look at the screen behind me and listen to the words of John Doe as he encourages us concerning the bridge: "I would encourage anybody who is in my position to take that leap of faith and walk across the bridge."

There are no clear elements there of Lordship Salvation—with the possible exception of the leap of faith and choosing to walk across the bridge, two vague concepts which someone in the audience might understand in that way. Yet it is still an imprecise gospel message. It is broad and fuzzy.

I imagine that it would be very difficult for an unbeliever to be saved simply by hearing this sort of message. The pastor doesn't ever call the listener to believe in Christ *for eternal life*. No verse is cited where the Lord Jesus promises eternal life to those who believe in Him. And what does the pastor mean when, speaking of the fourth step, he says, "I don't understand it all. There's questions I still have folks"? What doesn't he understand? What questions does he still have? He doesn't say. He seems to be suggesting that a person might not believe the whole gospel and yet still be saved. If so, what is it precisely that a person must believe to have eternal life? The listener is left to wonder what it is that he is to believe and why that belief should result in his salvation.

In what sense is the fourth step "a leap of faith"? Does the pastor mean that people are to "try Jesus"? Does he mean that at the point of salvation a person really doesn't know whether the Lord Jesus will give him eternal life or not? Is the gospel a sure thing, or is it like buying a ticket in the lottery?



What precisely is a person to do to be saved? The answer is far from clear in this message.

Free Grace pastors are not immune to the danger of becoming imprecise on the gospel. Someday all believers, including all believing pastors, will appear at the Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:10). The judgment of pastors will include, among other things, how they proclaimed the gospel (1 Cor 3:4-15; Jas 3:1). Were they clear? Were they unswerving in proclaiming the cross of Christ and the free gift of eternal life? Did they call people to believe in Christ for everlasting life?

### **C. Is It All Right to Exclude Clear Gospel Proclamation from Sunday Morning?**

Some pastors operate out of a different paradigm than “traditional” churches. They don’t feel that the Sunday morning service needs to be directly evangelistic. They are comfortable with viewing the Sunday morning service as a sort of pre-evangelism.

Their first aim is to get people to become regular attenders. Get them used to coming every week. They feel that once people get plugged in, they will eventually come to faith in Christ through one-on-one witness from other members, through the small groups, through the midweek believers’ service, etc.

I have three objections.

In the first place, many pastors who say they follow this paradigm don’t really do so. If a pastor preaches the imprecise gospel, he is not following the paradigm suggested here. He is proclaiming a gospel at the Sunday morning message, albeit a fuzzy one. He is doing more than pre-evangelism. If he is evangelizing, then he should do so clearly.

In the second place, assuming a pastor actually never evangelized on Sunday morning, there is reason to question whether this practice is biblical. Aren’t pastors to proclaim the whole counsel of God? Aren’t pastors to tell people who attend their church how they can have eternal life? If some pastors never do more than pre-evangelism on Sunday morning, are they practicing an unbiblical paradigm?<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Surely all would agree this must be done sometime. The question thus becomes, when is the “meeting of the church”? While the Bible does not require that the meeting of the church take place on Sunday morning—indeed, the early church seems to have met on Sunday evening, according to Acts 20:7ff—it does require that whenever it does meet that the Bible is clearly taught and that the gospel is proclaimed at least as often as the Lord’s Supper is observed (1 Cor 11:26).

In the third place, there is a real possibility that people coming to such churches will never hear the clear gospel. Inadvertently they may be given a false assurance that they are in right standing with God. If they attend church and sing the songs and never hear precisely what they need to do to be born again, then it is possible that they will become inoculated against the gospel. Many people never go on to attend the midweek believers' class or small groups. Many stop attending altogether. For many people who attend church on Sunday morning, if they don't hear the gospel then, they may never hear it at all.<sup>14</sup>

## V. Conclusion

Evangelicalism is in trouble because it is becoming increasingly unconcerned about clarity in the proclamation of the gospel.

How can we turn the tide? We can't. Only God can. However, He can use willing vessels. Pray for revival. Pray that the Lord will open the hearts of people to heed the biblical gospel (Acts 16:14) and to have the courage and commitment to proclaim it clearly (Rom 1:16). And, model this type of commitment to the clear gospel. The Lord may use you as an example to motivate others to do likewise.

In his book *Writing with Power*, University of Massachusetts Professor Peter Elbow makes an excellent point about writing which applies equally well to preaching the gospel:

Probably for a long time we will be hurt by people's disapproval, ridicule, or indifference to what we write. It is sensible to avoid dangerous audiences if they hold us back in the work of learning to improve our writing. *But we need to learn to write what is true and what needs saying even if the whole world is scandalized.*<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, we need to proclaim the true gospel "even if the whole world is scandalized."

<sup>14</sup> Of course, this isn't to suggest that at *every* meeting we must proclaim the gospel (though I personally think it's a good idea, especially if you have visitors each week). If a person regularly attends a church for a reasonable length of time, say 6 to 8 weeks, he or she ought to have heard at least once precisely what needs to be done to be saved.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Elbow, *Writing with Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 190, italics added.

A little later Elbow speaks of two different kinds of writing. One type he calls "get-the-results writing." Concerning this type he says:

You are writing to a particular audience and the whole point is to produce a particular effect. Unless the words have that effect you won't get the money or the contract or the job, you won't get into college, no one will come to your meeting. This is get-the-results writing.<sup>16</sup>

The other type of writing he calls "get-it-right writing." Concerning this type he says:

You don't care whether readers like it or not. The only result that counts is the satisfaction that comes from getting it the way you want it... Maybe the writing will in fact go to readers; maybe they'll like it; that's nice. But if they don't, that's their problem, not yours. (Of course, you may *use* readers for get-it-right writing. Their reactions can help you enormously—but for getting it the way you want it, not the way they want it.)<sup>17</sup>

Of course, as Elbow himself points out, these are two extremes. However, all writing, and all preaching, ultimately come down on one side or the other. When "push comes to shove," is it more important to get the results or to get it right? If you could only do one of those, which would it be?

The preacher's purpose should be to "get it right," regardless of whether he gets the numerical results he desires in terms of numbers of visitors, conversions, baptisms, new members, etc. The message of the gospel is not negotiable. The ultimate "result" every pastor should be after is to please God (Gal 1:10-11; 2 Cor 5:9-10). To do that we must "get it right." The Lord Jesus said those things His Father told Him to say, even though He knew He could have much better numerical results if He had given a different, more popular message.

The apostle Paul said, "My speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Cor 2:4). Paul was here disavowing the use of human rhetoric in place of the message of the cross. He was careful to preach

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., italics his.



the gospel clearly. Lim's comment on this verse is telling:

Paul is rejecting the contemporary, sophistic techniques as they were applied to preaching—a practice which emphasizes the form rather than the content of the sermon and the role of the preacher rather than the Gospel (cf. I Cor. 4:20). He is arguing against that method of preaching which employs literary figures *not as a means to convey better the message of the Gospel, but as ornamentations intended to please and amuse the congregation.*<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Timothy H. Lim, "Not in Persuasive Words of Wisdom, But in the Demonstration of the Spirit and Power' [1 Cor 2:4]," *Novum Testamentum* 29 (1987): 149, italics added.

## A Voice from the Past:

# SONSHIP AND HEIRSHIP<sup>1</sup>

C. H. MACKINTOSH<sup>2</sup>

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward" (Gen 15:1).

The Lord would not suffer His servant to be a loser, by rejecting the offers of the world. It was infinitely better for Abraham to find himself hidden behind Jehovah's shield than to take refuge beneath the patronage of the king of Sodom. The position into which Abraham is put, in the opening verse of our chapter, is beautifully expressive of the position into which every soul is introduced by the faith of Christ. Jehovah was his "shield," that he might rest in Him; Jehovah was his "reward," that he might wait for Him. So with the believer now: he finds his present rest, his present peace, his present security, all in Christ. No dart of the enemy can possibly penetrate the shield which covers the weakest believer in Jesus.

<sup>1</sup> Our last selection from "C.H.M." ("Sanctification: What Is It?" *JOTGES* [Autumn 1992]: 45-56) as he was affectionately called, was from his *Miscellaneous Writings*. The present offering is from his other well-known work, *Notes on the Pentateuch*. Regarding this work, Wilbur M. Smith, a great evangelical bibliographer of recent years, wrote: "One of the richest devotional works in the English language. A precious spiritual help to many of God's choicest servants for two generations. Should be possessed, read, and meditated upon by every Bible student, especially every Sunday-school teacher." The original (non-pirated!) American edition was published in 1879, by Loizeaux Brothers, now of Neptune, New Jersey. (It is still printed by them.) They have kindly granted us permission to update the spelling and punctuation a bit, as well as to use the New King James Version for easier modern reading and add Scripture references in those places where they were not provided.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Henry Mackintosh (1820-1896) was born in County Wicklow, Ireland, converted at 18, and became a fervent advocate of grace principles, ministering chiefly among the Brethren Assemblies in the British Isles. It is his warm-hearted evangelical writings that have continued to bless Bible Christians all over the world.

And then, as to the future, Christ fills it. Precious portion! Precious hope! A portion which can never be exhausted, a hope which will never make ashamed. Both are infallibly secured by the counsels of God and the accomplished atonement of Christ. The present enjoyment thereof is by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who dwells in us. This being the case, it is manifest that if the believer is pursuing a worldly career, or indulging in worldly or carnal desires, he cannot be enjoying either the "shield" or the "reward." If the Holy Spirit is grieved, He will not minister the enjoyment of that which is our proper portion—our proper hope. Hence, in the section of Abraham's history now before us, we see that when he had returned from the slaughter of the kings, and rejected the offer of the king of Sodom, Jehovah rose before his soul in the double character, as his "shield" and his "exceeding great reward." Let the heart ponder this, for it contains a volume of deeply practical truth.

In it we have unfolded to us the two great principles of sonship and heirship.

## I. Sonship

But Abram said, "Lord God, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" Then Abram said, "Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!" (Gen 15:2-3).

Abraham desired a son, for he knew, upon divine authority, that his "seed" should inherit the land (13:15). Sonship and heirship are inseparably connected in the thoughts of God—"one who will come from your own body shall be your heir" (Gen 15:4). Sonship is the proper basis of everything; and, moreover, it is the result of God's sovereign counsel and operation, as we read in Jas 1:18, "Of His own will He brought us forth." Finally, it is founded upon God's eternal principle of resurrection. How else could it be? Abraham's body was "dead;" wherefore, in his case, as in every other, sonship must be in the power of resurrection. Nature is dead, and can neither beget nor conceive aught for God. There lay the inheritance stretching out before the patriarch's eye, in all its magnificent dimensions; but where was the heir? Abraham's body and Sarah's womb alike answered "death." But Jehovah is the God of resurrection, and therefore a "dead body" was the very thing for Him to act upon. Had nature not been dead, God should have put it to death ere He could fully show Himself. The most suitable theatre for the living God is that from which nature, with all its boasted powers and empty



pretensions, has been totally expelled by the sentence of death. Wherefore, God's word to Abraham was:

"Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them." And He said to him, "so shall your descendants be" (Gen 15:5b).

When the God of resurrection fills the vision, there is no limit to the soul's blessing; for He who can quicken the dead, can do anything.

And he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness (Gen 15:6).

The imputation of righteousness to Abraham is here founded upon his believing in the Lord as the Quickener of the dead. It is in this character that He reveals Himself in a world where death reigns; and when a soul believes in Him as such, it is counted righteous in His sight. This necessarily shuts man out, as regards his co-operation, for what can he do in the midst of a scene of death? Can he raise the dead? Can he open the gates of the grave? Can he deliver himself from the power of death, and walk forth, in life and liberty, beyond the limits of its dreary domain? Assuredly not. Well, then, if he cannot do so, he cannot work out righteousness, nor establish himself in the relation of sonship. "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living" (Matt 22:32) and therefore, so long as a man is under the power of death, and under the dominion of sin, he can neither know the position of a son, nor the condition of righteousness. Thus, God alone can bestow the adoption of sons, and He alone can impute righteousness, and both are connected with faith in Him as the One who raised up Christ from the dead.

It is in this way that the apostle handles the question of Abraham's faith in Romans 4, where he says:

Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead (Rom 4:23-24).

Here, the God of resurrection is presented "to us also" as the object of our righteousness. If Abraham had looked up into heaven's vault, spangled with innumerable stars, and then looked at "his own body, already dead" (Rom 4:19a), how could he ever grasp the idea of a seed as numerous as those stars? Impossible. But he did not look at his own body, but at the resurrection-power of God. And inasmuch as that was the power which was to produce the seed, we can easily see that the stars of heaven and the sand on the seashore are but feeble figures indeed; for

what natural object could possibly illustrate the effect of that power which can raise the dead?

So also, when a sinner hearkens to the glad tidings of the gospel, were he to look up to the unsullied light of the divine presence, and then look down into the unexplored depths of his own evil nature, he might well exclaim, "How can I ever get thither?—how can I ever be fit to dwell in that light? Where is the answer? In himself? Nay, blessed be God, but in that blessed One who traveled from the bosom to the cross and the grave, and from thence to the throne, thus filling up, in His Person and work, all the space between those extreme points. There can be nothing higher than the bosom of God—the eternal dwelling place of the Son, and there can be nothing lower than the cross and the grave; but, amazing truth! I find Christ in both. I find Him in the bosom, and I find Him in the grave. He went down into death in order that He might leave behind Him, in the dust thereof, the full weight of His people's sins and iniquities. Christ in the grave exhibits the end of everything human—the end of sin—the full limit of Satan's power. The grave of Jesus forms the grand terminus of all. But resurrection takes us beyond this terminus, and constitutes the imperishable basis on which God's glory and man's blessing repose forever. The moment the eye of faith rests on a risen Christ, there is a triumphant answer to every question as to sin, judgment, death, and the grave. The One who divinely met all these is alive from the dead, and has taken His seat at the right hand of the Majesty in the heavens. And not only so, but the Spirit of that risen and glorified One, in the believer, constitutes him a son. He is quickened out of the grave of Christ: as we read:

And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses (Col 2:13).

Hence, therefore, sonship, being founded on resurrection, stands connected with perfect justification—perfect righteousness—perfect freedom from everything which could in anywise be against us. God could not have us in His presence with sin upon us. He could not suffer a single speck or stain of sin upon His sons and daughters. The father could not have the prodigal at *his* table with the rags of the far country upon him. He could go forth to meet him in those rags—it was worthy and beautifully characteristic of his *grace* so to do; but then to seat him at his table in the rags would never do. The grace that brought the father out to the prodigal reigns through the righteousness which



brought the prodigal in to the father. It would not have been grace had the father waited for the son to deck himself in robes of his own providing, and it would not have been righteous to bring him in in his rags. But both grace and righteousness shone forth in all their respective brightness and beauty when the father went out and fell on the prodigal's neck, and yet did not give him a seat at his table until he was clad and decked in a manner suited to that elevated and happy position. God, in Christ, has stooped to the very lowest point of man's moral condition, that, by stooping, He might raise man to the very highest point of blessedness, in fellowship with Himself. From all this, it follows, that our sonship, with all its consequent dignities and privileges, is entirely independent of us. We have just as little to do with it as Abraham's dead body and Sarah's dead womb had to do with a seed as numerous as the stars which garnish the heavens, or as the sand on the seashore. It is all of God. God the Father drew the plan, God the Son laid the foundation, and God the Holy Spirit raises the superstructure; and on this superstructure appears the inscription:

**"THROUGH GRACE, BY FAITH,  
WITHOUT WORKS OF LAW."**

## II. Heirship

But then opens another most important subject to our view, namely, *heirship*. The question of sonship and righteousness being fully settled—divinely and unconditionally settled, the Lord said to Abraham: "I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it" (Gen 15:7).

Here comes out the great question of heirship, and the peculiar path along which the chosen heirs are to travel ere they reach the promised inheritance. "And if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together" (Rom 8:17). Our way to the kingdom lies through suffering, affliction, and tribulation; but, thank God, we can, by faith, say, "the *sufferings* of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Rom 8:18). And further, we know that "our *light affliction*, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" (2 Cor 4:17). Finally, "we also glory in *tribulations*, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Rom



5:3b-4). It is a high honor and a real privilege to be allowed to drink of our blessed Master's cup, and be baptized with His baptism, to travel in blest companionship with Him along the road which leads directly to the glorious inheritance. The Heir and joint-heirs reach that inheritance by the pathway of suffering.

But let it be remembered that the suffering of which the joint heirs participate has no penal element in it. It is not suffering from the hand of infinite justice, because of sin. All that was fully met on the cross, when the divine victim bowed His sacred head beneath the stroke. "Christ also suffered *once* for sins," and that "*once*" was on the tree, and *nowhere else* (1 Pet 3:18a). He never suffered for sins before, and He never can suffer for sins again. "*Once*, at the end of the ages [the end of all flesh], He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself" (Heb 9:26b). "Christ was offered *once*" (Heb 9:28a).

There are two ways in which to view a suffering Christ, first, as bruised of Jehovah; secondly, as rejected of men. In the former, He stood alone; in the latter, we have the honor of being associated with Him. In the former, I say, He stood alone, for who could have stood with Him? He bore the wrath of God alone; He traveled in solitude down into "the rough valley that had neither been eared nor sown," and there He settled forever the question of our sins. *With* this we had nothing to do, though *to* this we are eternally indebted for everything. He fought the fight and gained the victory alone, but He divides the spoils with us. He was in solitude "in the horrible pit and the miry clay"; but directly He planted His foot on the everlasting "rock" of resurrection, He associates us with Him. He uttered the *cry* alone; He sings the "*new song*" in company (Psalm 40:2-3).

Now the question is, shall we refuse to suffer from the hand of man *with Him* who suffered from the hand of God *for us*? That it is, in a certain sense, a question, is evident, from the Spirit's constant use of the word "if," in connection with it.—"If indeed we suffer with Him" (Rom 8:17b)—"If we endure, we shall also reign" (2 Tim 2:12). There is no such question as to sonship. We do not reach the high dignity of sons through suffering, but through the quickening power of the Holy Spirit, founded on the accomplished work of Christ, according to God's eternal counsel. This can never be touched. We do not reach the *family* through suffering. The apostle does not say, "That you may be counted worthy of the *family* of God for which you also suffer." They were in the family already; but they were bound for the kingdom, and their road to that kingdom lay through suffering; and not only so, but the measure of suffering for the kingdom would be according to their

devotedness and conformity to the King. The more like we are to Him, the more we shall suffer *with* Him; and the deeper our fellowship with Him in the suffering, the deeper will be our fellowship in the glory. There is a difference between the *house* of the Father and the kingdom of the Son: in the former, it will be a question of capacity; in the latter, a question of assigned position. All my children may be around my table, but their enjoyment of my company and conversation will entirely depend on their capacity. One may be seated on my knee, in the full enjoyment of his relationship, as a child, yet perfectly unable to comprehend a word I say; another may exhibit uncommon intelligence in conversation, yet not be a whit happier in his relationship than the infant on my knee. But when it becomes a question of service for me, or public identification with me, it is evidently quite another thing. This is but a feeble illustration of the idea of capacity in the Father's house, and assigned position in the kingdom of the Son.

But let it be remembered that our suffering with Christ is not a yoke of bondage, but a matter of privilege; not an iron rule, but a gracious gift; not constrained servitude, but voluntary devotedness.

"For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake" (Phil 1:29). Moreover, there can be little doubt but that the real secret of suffering for Christ is to have the heart's affections centered in Him. The more I love Jesus, the closer I shall walk with Him, and the closer I walk with Him, the more faithfully I shall imitate Him, and the more faithfully I imitate Him, the more I shall suffer with Him. Thus it all flows from love to Christ; and then it is a fundamental truth that "we love Him because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). In this, as in everything else, let us beware of a legal spirit; for it must not be imagined that a man with the yoke of legality round his neck is suffering for Christ. Alas! It is much to be feared that such a one does not know Christ, does not know the blessedness of sonship, has not yet been established in grace, is rather seeking to reach the family by works of law than to reach the kingdom by the path of suffering.

On the other hand, let us see that we are not shrinking from our Master's cup and baptism. Let us not profess to enjoy the benefits which His cross secures, while we refuse the rejection which that cross involves. We may rest assured that the road to the kingdom is not enlightened by the sunshine of this world's favor, nor strewn with the roses of its prosperity. If a Christian is advancing in the world, he has much reason to apprehend that he is not walking in company with Christ. "If anyone

serves Me, let him follow Me; and where I am, there My servant will be also" (John 12:26). What was the goal of Christ's earthly career? Was it an elevated, influential position in this world? By no means. What then? He found His place on the cross, between two condemned malefactors. But, it will be said, God was in this. True; yet man was in it likewise. And this latter truth is what must inevitably secure our rejection by the world, if only we keep in company with Christ. The companionship of Christ, which lets me into heaven, casts me out of earth; and to talk of the former, while I am ignorant of the latter, proves there is something wrong. If Christ were on earth now, what would His path be? Whither would it tend? Where would it terminate? Would we like to walk with Him? Let us answer those inquiries under the edge of the Word, and under the eye of the Almighty; and may the Holy Spirit make us faithful to an absent, a rejected, a crucified Master. The man who walks in the Spirit will be filled with Christ; and, being filled with Him, he will not be occupied with suffering, but with Him for whom he suffers. If the eye is fixed on Christ, the suffering will be as nothing in comparison with the present joy and future glory.



Grace in the Arts:

**THOMAS HARDY:**  
**The Tragedy of a Life Without  
Christ**

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**I. Introduction**

**A. Why Read an Agnostic?**

The evangelist Charles Finney stated: "I cannot believe that a person who has ever known the love of God can ever relish a secular novel ... Let me visit your ... books. What is here? Byron, Scott, Shakespeare and a host of triflers and blasphemers of God."<sup>2</sup> To that list Finney would have undoubtedly added Thomas Hardy the agnostic. Therefore, why read such a writer?

First, there are solid biblical reasons for reading worthwhile non-Christian literature. Frank Gaebelin popularized the maxim: "All truth is God's truth"—no matter what the literary source. The apostle Paul believed this idea, for on at least three occasions (Acts 17:28; 1 Cor 15:33; Titus 1:12) he quoted from secular sources. Paul was obviously versed in more than the Bible.

Second, if we desire to understand the mind-set of the non-Christian culture, then we must be aware of the particular philosophies and notions rampant at any given time. Great literature is usually an index to cultural concepts.

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Townsend returns to our "Grace in the Arts" section for another literary analysis from an evangelical perspective of a well-known writer. Previous subjects have included Herman Melville and Somerset Maugham (*JOTGES*, Spring 1989, pp. 55-66), Charles Dickens, Robert Louis Stevenson, and others (*JOTGES*, Autumn 1990, pp. 53-64). Ed.

<sup>2</sup> Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 62.

Third, if we would have a *heart* for unbelievers, then we need to grasp where and how their *head* is functioning. Thomas Hardy himself spoke of the “ache of modernism.” The Christian who has experientially understood that life without Christ is a tragedy should have an ache in his or her *heart* for unbelievers to find the fulfillment that is in Christ.

To counter Finney, then, read the playboy Byron’s magnificent biblical poem “The Destruction of Sennacherib”; read Sir Walter Scott, who operated out of a Christian consensus; and read Shakespeare (as a past article in this journal indicates: *JOTGES*, Spring, 1991; pp. 47-63).

### B. Who Was Thomas Hardy?

If you had literature’s leading lights—James Barrie (author of *Peter Pan*), John Galsworthy, Edmond Gosse, A. E. Housman, George Bernard Shaw, Rudyard Kipling, as well as the prime minister of England—as your pallbearers (as Thomas Hardy did), you’d have to be thought rather important. Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) never graduated from college, yet he received honorary doctorates from the universities of Aberdeen, Bristol, Cambridge, and Oxford. Hardy’s five most important novels (in chronological order) are *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *The Return of the Native*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, and *Jude the Obscure*.<sup>3</sup> Hardy also wrote over 900 poems and more than 40 short stories. He was considered the greatest writer of English tragedy in his time. Thus, W. M. Parker (editor of Sir Walter Scott’s letters) could call Hardy “the greatest imaginative genius of modern times.”<sup>4</sup>

## II. The Biblical Hardy

### A. Biblical Allusions

How many seminary graduates could identify who Ahimaaz and Aholibah are or where they are found in the Bible? How many Bible-literate people could quote from Psalm 102? Do you know where Jared and Mahaleel are in Scripture? All of these items—and (literally)

<sup>3</sup> Where it seems necessary in the body of the text, I will employ the abbreviations *FMC* for *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *RN* for *The Return of the Native*, *MC* for *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess* for *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, and *JO* for *Jude the Obscure*.

<sup>4</sup> *The Genius of Thomas Hardy*, edited by Margaret Drabble (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 47.

hundreds more—are found by way of biblical allusion in Thomas Hardy's novels.

Thomas Hardy was steeped in classical and biblical literature. Marlene Springer, who wrote a book devoted explicitly to this subject, claimed that as an author, Hardy “out-alluded virtually every allusionist ...”<sup>5</sup> This agnostic was virtually a walking Bible concordance! Indeed, I would pit Hardy against any seminary graduate today (and bet big bucks—if I were a betting person) as a sure wager to win any Bible knowledge proficiency test. Hardy read the Bible in both Latin and Greek. Desmond Hawkins declared that Hardy “was more certainly influenced by [the Bible] than any novelist writing today.”<sup>6</sup> I think Hawkins's evaluation would stand undisputed.

The heading to this section of the Journal is “Grace in the Arts.” What theologians call “common grace” is functioning in the life of this agnostic to make his pessimistic works so riddled with biblical allusions. Also, God's grace is apparent in allowing this agnostic 88 years of life in which he might even trifle with that grace (2 Pet 3:9).

Thomas Hardy had considerable biblical background. His life-dream as a child was to be a parson. He played the violin in church as a youth. He taught Sunday School. His hero, folk-poet William Barnes, was a Christian. His best friend was the brother of the Bible commentator H. C. G. Moule, Anglican bishop of Durham. Hardy read numerous theological works up until his mid-twenties, presumably in preparation for the professional ministry. In fact, this agnostic never stopped attending, and taking communion in the Anglican church—even after his first (evangelical) wife died!

Thomas Hardy's works are replete with scriptural allusions. One frequent declaration heard in church history classes is that if our NT had been destroyed, it could almost be replaced by quotations culled from the early Church Fathers. Almost the same could be said—with forgivable exaggeration—with reference to Hardy's writings.

I have read 9 of his 14 novels and all of his 947 poems. Below are tabulated my count of biblical allusions in 9 of Hardy's major novels. In the left hand column are listed figures in which Hardy supplies general references to Christian terms, phrases, ideas, and so forth. In the right hand

<sup>5</sup> Marlene Springer, *Hardy's Use of Allusion* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1983), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Desmond Hawkins, *Hardy the Novelist* (Newton Abbot, UK: David and Charles, 1950), 73.



column are listed numbers from each book for sentences containing an allusion where some rather specific Scripture verse or passage can be cited. Naturally, there is some subjectivity involved in the placement of these two sets of figures.

Title	General Allusions	Specific Allusions to Scripture
<i>Under the Greenwood Tree</i>	74	11
<i>A Pair of Blue Eyes</i>	84	41
<i>Far from the Madding Crowd</i>	154	79
<i>The Return of the Native</i>	124	71
<i>The Mayor of Casterbridge</i>	76	41
<i>The Woodlanders</i>	85	35
<i>Tess of the D'Urbervilles</i>	428	110
<i>Jude the Obscure</i>	456	112
<i>The Well-Beloved</i>	35	18
<i>Hardy's Complete Poems</i>	212	147
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1728</b>	<b>665</b>

As can be seen from the statistics compiled above, there are Christian books these days in which one could not find as many references to Scripture as one could find in this agnostic's literature.

The sections in Hardy's books that are a special repository for biblical allusions are those where his rustics speak. These conversations between rural folk are salted with Scripture—sometimes insightful, sometimes confused and superstitious. For instance, when one rural character gets scared, he recites the Lord's Prayer, then the Ten Commandments, followed by "dearly beloved brethren," which is what his church experience prods him to remember (*FMC*, chap 8). One rustic child was erroneously named Cain, since his mother got the name in the Bible story mixed up with Abel's (*FMC*, chap 10).

One of Hardy's other rustics complains, "I was sitting at home looking for Ephesians, and I says to myself, 'Tis nothing but Corinthians and Thessalonians in this danged Testament'" (*FMC*, chap 21). (Perhaps childhood sword drills would have helped him!) Another country fellow speaks erroneously of "King Noah...entering into the ark" (*FMC*, chap 42). Still another rustic figure recites the names of "Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John" when he fears the devil is near him (*RN*, chap 3).

At this juncture I would like to provide a brief sampling of some specific scriptural allusions from Hardy's novels:

At the end of *Under the Greenwood Tree* one finds Hardy quoting Jer 2:32 ("Can a maid forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire?") in connection with Fancy Day's vanity over her clothes. "Even to half my kingdom" in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* echoes Mark 6:23. *The Return of the Native* (chap 6) mentions "the witch of Endor [who] called up Samuel." Also in this novel Hardy shows his knowledge of the Greek NT (2 Pet 2:4) by twice using the term "Tartarian."<sup>7</sup>

*The Mayor of Casterbridge* refers to "Jacob in Padan-aram" with his ring-straked sheep. In *The Woodlanders* (chap 14) we meet "the sword of the Lord and of Gideon." *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* has one of its characters use Job's words (3:1-3): "I wish I'd never been born." On more than one occasion a character in *Jude the Obscure* cites 1 Cor 4:9 ("we are made a spectacle," etc.). *The Well-Beloved* refers to "the elect lady" (2 John 1; Part 3, chap 5) and "those who knew not Joseph" (Exod 1:8; Part 3, chap 8).

In one case the very name of the novel (*A Laodicean*) reflects biblical language (Rev 3:14). Often Hardy's characters' names reflect biblical borrowing (such as, Bathsheba, Gabriel, Jude, Laban, etc.) and tip us off to the given character's character as well. For example, Bathsheba unintentionally attracts by her beauty, and Gabriel Oak is as sturdy as his name implies.

## B. A Biblical Plot

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge* Thomas Hardy largely modeled his story-plot on the biblical interrelationship between Saul and David. This thesis has been detailed significantly in an article by Julian Moynahan.<sup>8</sup>

The novel itself states that Michael Henchard, the lead character and mayor, "felt like Saul at his reception by Samuel" (chap 26). The book revolves around the relationship of an older head of government (Mayor Henchard) to a younger man (Donald Farfrae). As the plot progresses, the older becomes jealous of the younger and eventually is replaced as government leader by the younger (as Saul was by David).

<sup>7</sup>The Greek word containing "hell" in this verse is *tartarōsas*.

<sup>8</sup>Julian Moynahan, "The Mayor of Casterbridge and the Old Testament's First Book of Samuel: A Study of Some Literary Relationships," in *Biblical Images in Literature*, edited by Roland Bartel with James S. Ackerman and Thayer S. Warshaw (New York: Abingdon Press, 1975), 71-88.

Numerous themes in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* clearly parallel the Saul-to-David biblical narrative. First, the older is attracted to the younger particularly by his musical ability. Second, the younger (Farfrae) is described as “ruddy and of a fair countenance” (compare this with 1 Sam 16:12 and 17:42). Third, Henchard is famed for his impulsive moodiness (similar to Saul’s mental ups and downs). Fourth, the younger saves the older’s reputation from a goliath of failure. Fifth, the older gets jealous of his rival when he hears people praising the younger and wishing Farfrae were in the elder’s place. Thus, Farfrae becomes “an enemy” of Henchard.

Moreover Michael Henchard consults a wizard-like weather forecaster in a way similar to that of Saul consulting the witch of Endor. Farfrae, like David, also has opportunities to wreak revenge on the one who hates him, but the younger man refuses the course of vengeance. In fact, Henchard tries explicitly to kill Farfrae at one point. Also in the novel the hideout of certain bad characters is called “the Adullam of all the surrounding villages” (chap 36). *The Mayor of Casterbridge* concludes just as the book of 1 Samuel does—with the tragic death of its tragic figure.

This then is the *biblical* Hardy—the very fabric of his language, the vast amount of biblical allusions, the derived names of certain characters, and the framework of one entire novel are all colored extensively by a mind immersed in the thought-world of Scripture. Tragically, however, such biblical flavoring is far from the whole story. Therefore, we now turn to the *unbiblical* Hardy.

### III. The Unbiblical Hardy

#### A. His Abandonment of Christianity

Hardy’s thought-forms were often Bible-tintured, but his basic philosophy was anything but biblical. What happened to one who grew up dreaming of becoming a Christian minister and who read theology in preparation for that profession?

Unfortunately there is no clear-cut before-and-after traceable in his biography. Nor does there seem to have been a specific crisis marking such a shift in thought. Terry Coleman wrote: “At the beginning of [1861] Hardy was probably still a Christian, and at the end [of 1866] he certainly was not, and of the process by which this charge came over



such a mind we know nothing.”<sup>9</sup> While it isn’t quite true to say “we know nothing,” we certainly have no definitive data on a distinct turning-point in Hardy’s turning away from Christianity. Robert Gittings observed that “until the age of 26 [Hardy] still considered entering the Church [ministry].”<sup>10</sup>

While we may not be able to pinpoint some watershed experience in which Hardy abandoned orthodox Christianity, there are clearly some contributing causes for his forsaking the faith.<sup>11</sup>

The first of the contributing causes to Hardy’s apostasy is a hard one to pin down with definitive evidence, yet I suspect that every Hardy biographer would concur that some mysterious romantic attachment was at the root of bitterness in Hardy’s life. Biographers have suggested at least five different love affairs in Hardy’s early life. One researcher, Lois Deacon, postulated on the basis of plausible evidence that Hardy had had a five-year affair with Tryphena Sparks, whom he thought to be his cousin. Then he discovered that Tryphena was the illegitimate daughter of his own sister, who herself was the illegitimate daughter of his mother.<sup>12</sup> Thus, he broke off an engagement. Some interpreters even claim they had an illegitimate child together who is represented by the character called Little Father Time in *Jude the Obscure*. Whether Lois Deacon’s specific hypothesis is factual or not, something very unaccountable and suppressed in Hardy’s relationship with women seems necessary to account for his turning sour on life as well as this theme in his writing.

Second, Hardy’s best friend (and mentor)—Horace Moule, the brother of evangelical commentator H. C. G. Moule—committed suicide. Moule’s father and his brothers are to some extent the prototype for Angel Clare’s father and family in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. In this book the clerical father is described as “an evangelical of the evangelicals” (chap 25) and an “unimpeachable Christian” with a

<sup>9</sup> *The Genius of Thomas Hardy*, 16. While Coleman’s choice of words is unfortunate and unbiblical (still a Christian?), his point is actually that Hardy at one time called himself a Christian and later ceased doing so.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Gittings, *Young Thomas Hardy* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Co., 1975), 46.

<sup>11</sup> There is insufficient evidence to be certain whether Hardy ever believed in Christ for eternal life. When I comment on his “forsaking the faith,” I am referring to his decision to no longer profess to be a Christian.

<sup>12</sup> *The Genius of Thomas Hardy*, 19-23.

“Pauline view of humanity” (chap 26). Nevertheless, Horace Moule, a Cambridge graduate, became an alcoholic and committed suicide. This tragedy unquestionably had a devastating effect upon Thomas Hardy.

Third, Hardy was influenced by “the yeasty ideas of his formative years,” such as “evolution [and] the new morality.”<sup>13</sup> Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* was published when Hardy was nineteen years old. Hardy read Darwin, Spencer, Comte, and Schopenhauer. A nature “red in tooth and claw” (to borrow Thomas Hobbes’s phrase) is a major theme in Hardy’s novels.

Fourth, some scholars have asserted that (like the painter van Gogh) Hardy was rejected upon application to Cambridge University as Jude Fawley was in *Jude the Obscure*. Such a bitter rejection might partly account for his anti-Christian attitude.

Fifth, one occasion may have cemented Hardy’s convictions away from Christianity. Leslie Stephen, editor of Cornhill Magazine, was influential in Hardy’s writing experience. In fact, Hardy described Stephen as “the man whose philosophy was to influence his own ... more than that of any other contemporary.”<sup>14</sup> Stephen called on Thomas Hardy “on 23 March 1875 to witness his renunciation of the holy orders [to the Anglican ministry] he had taken in 1855 ...”<sup>15</sup> By affirming Leslie Stephen on that occasion, Hardy was issuing a sort of declaration of agnosticism.

## B. His Poisoned Philosophy

To say that Hardy is not known for his novels ending “happily ever after” is an understatement! In his writings “all things work together” for the worst—to parody Rom 8:28. In *The Woodlanders* Grace Melbury watches her truest love, Giles Winterbourne, die. She was “bitter with all that had befallen her—with the cruelties that had attacked her—with life—with Heaven” (chap 43). Schoolmaster Phillotson remarks, “Cruelty is the law pervading all nature and society; and we can’t get out of it if we would” [*JO*, Part 5, chap 8]. In *Desperate Remedies* Mr. Springrove says, “There’s a back’ard current in the world, and we must do our utmost to advance in order just to bide where we be.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Hawkins, *Hardy the Novelist*, 97.

<sup>14</sup>*The Genius of Thomas Hardy*, 34.

<sup>15</sup>Martin Seymour-Smith, *Hardy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 182.

<sup>16</sup>Quoted by Marlene Springer, *Hardy’s Use of Allusion*, 92.

Most readers of Hardy label him a pessimist. His books tend to get more bitter in the consecutive order of their writing with the bitterest novels (*Tess* and *JO*) coming at the end of his novel-writing career.

Hardy consistently denied that he was a pessimist, preferring to call himself a “meliorist,” that is, one who was neither an optimist nor a pessimist, but believed the world could be made *better* if we all worked at it. Sheila Sullivan said Hardy was “prepared to face the worst an indifferent universe might have to offer, but who believed nevertheless that the will to live persists, and that no life is entirely without its consolation.”<sup>17</sup>

### C. His Philosophical Predicament

If there is a God, then God can be blamed for the tragic mess on this planet (some would reason). However, if there is no God, who or what is there to blame for such rotten happenings? This dilemma tends to be Hardy’s philosophical predicament. To let God be or not be—that is the question (à la Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*). Somewhere G. K. Chesterton (the Anglican debater-turned Roman Catholic) takes Thomas Hardy to task for playing both sides of the fence. If there is no God, why spend your time railing in the direction of heaven?

This dilemma emerges in a conversational interchange between Sue Bridehead and her first husband (to whom she eventually returns), Richard Phillotson (in *JO*). She admits that her penchant for not wanting to sleep with her lawful husband is wrong, yet she exclaims: “It is not I altogether that am to blame!” Phillotson then responds, “Who is then? Am I?” To his remark Sue counters, “No—I don’t know! The universe, I suppose—things in general, because they are so horrid and cruel!” (*JO*, Part 4, chap 3). Thus, the big question is: Whom do you blame if you’re an agnostic?

### D. His Invented Ironies

In one’s fiction a writer can control his or her world. Thus, through the mouths of his characters, Hardy inevitably reflects his own pessimistic world-view. Many writers have used a technique called *deus ex machina* (woodenly rendered, a “god out of a machine”). This technique was literally used in ancient drama when a mechanical device would be

<sup>17</sup> *The Genius of Thomas Hardy*, 39.



employed in order to let a “god” down on stage to serve as a rescuer from the characters’ predicament.

Thomas Hardy used almost a reverse approach to the *deus ex machina* technique. He invented ironical incidents in order to show a perverse world-order in operation. For instance, an inexperienced sheepdog (in *FMC*) drives Gabriel Oak’s entire flock over a precipice, thereby bankrupting Oak and altering the course of Gabriel’s entire life. Or, Tess sticks a future-determining note under Angel Clare’s door—only to have the paper stick under the carpet so that Angel never reads her moral confession. Thus, on one small act hinges huge significance for Tess. Marlene Springer said that Hardy “saw all of life as a collage of ironies.”<sup>18</sup>

There are three classic cases of these inserted ironies where Hardy seemed to be taking his best and most brutal potshot at the orthodox Christian view of God. All three involve Christian hymns. In *Tess*, before her family is about to be evicted from their home (due to poverty and Tess’s refusal to succumb to her relentless seducer, Alec D’Urberville), Tess asks her little brothers and sisters to sing. They select a hymn they knew entitled “Joyful”! Thus, Hardy gets in his digs at Christian joy when life is caving in around the sexually-faithful Tess.

There is a second hymn referred to in *Tess*. It is also sung on a heart-wrenching occasion (chap 51). The hymn runs:

“Here we suffer grief and pain;  
Here we meet to part again.  
In heaven we part no more.”

There is a chime of compassion in the Christian’s heart as the agnostic Hardy comments after the hymn: “If she could only believe what the children sang.” Yes, if only ...

Probably the bitterest ironical twist in Hardy’s novels appears in his last and, by common consent, bitterest book, *Jude the Obscure*. Jude and Sue have several children together. They also unofficially adopt the child by Jude’s first (legal) marriage. Because of his gloomy disposition, the child is nicknamed “Little Father Time.” When the family has a desperate time securing a room together (because Jude and Sue have never been legally married), Little Father Time bewails the news that there is yet another child on the way. More children, more problems. Because this originally unwanted child is so morose, he hangs the other two children and then commits suicide himself. Martin Seymour-Smith

<sup>18</sup> Springer, *Hardy’s Use of Allusion*, 15.

quotes Ian Gregor as calling this incident the "most terrible scene in Hardy's fiction—indeed it might reasonably be argued in English fiction."<sup>19</sup> Ironically, however, just as the horrendous hanging and suicide are discovered, a nearby church organ peals out a rendition of the seventy-third psalm: "Truly God is loving unto Israel." Consequently, Hardy takes his *hadiest* knock at the Christian concept of a loving God in a cruelly destructive world. Thomas Hardy was the obverse to Robert Browning's optimism: All's *wrong* with the world!

### E. His Agnostic Appraisal

Hardy's pen was dipped in acid. A significant part of his own life-story is reflected in *Jude the Obscure*. Like Jude, Hardy had been a stonemason's apprentice. Like Jude, Hardy had been enamored of the famous university—which closed its doors to him. Like Jude, Hardy had his lifelong sexual struggle of flesh versus spirit. Like Jude, Hardy had wanted to be a ministerial student and later rejected Christianity. And—like Jude—Hardy had faced the "arrows of outrageous fortune."

As a result of his rejection of Christianity, Hardy adopted an embittered, agnostic stance—claiming not really to believe in a God, yet relentlessly flailing away at Someone or something out there. In country music vernacular, he kept singing a "Somebody-done-somebody-wrong song."

The author's appraisal—in the form of agnosticism—of what was going on in our world took the form of using roundabout phrases for the Supreme Power that Christians call "God." Thus, Hardy will speak of an "unconscious will" or an "Immanent Will" or "the Prime Cause." In *The Woodlanders* Hardy uses the expression "the Unfulfilled Intention." This "Prime Force" is without moral value and is oblivious to people's pain.

Once one has abandoned the supernatural, all that is left is the natural world. Consequently, Hardy's "Unfulfilled Intention" in nature is described in *The Woodlanders* (chap 7). Here the trees are suffocated by "huge lungs of fungi." Hardy writes: "The leaf was deformed . . . , the lichen ate the vigor of the stalk, and the ivy slowly strangled to death the promised sapling." Nature does not present a pretty picture in Thomas Hardy's books.

<sup>19</sup> Seymour-Smith, *Hardy*, 532.

For Hardy, what happens to inanimate nature also happens to human nature. One of the saddest passages in literature is the concluding summary in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. For several hundred pages the reader has looked over the shoulder of Tess while she is raped, is abandoned by her too-good legal husband, is forced to wander and take menial, starvation-level jobs, is pestered repeatedly by her old seducer, and waits on her abandoning husband to return from South America. Finally, Tess breaks. In order to keep her maternal family from starving, Tess finally returns to her original, wealthy seducer, Alec, only then to have her sickening husband show up. Then Tess murders Alec out of love for her husband. Consequently, Tess is hanged. This scene Hardy milks for all it's worth by proclaiming that "the President of the Immortals" had finally done savagely toying with Tess—a "moral woman" (so Hardy proclaims her).

A Christian reader resultantly feels that beneath Hardy's text there is a subtext that constantly suggests: I want you Christians to see your malevolent "God" for all He's worth. In *The Woodlanders* one female character bewails: "if heaven would only give [me] strength—but heaven never did."

Thus, the Hardyan conclusion (in *Tess*, chap 37) is:

"God's not in his heaven;  
All's wrong with the world."

#### IV. A Lesson Learned from an Agnostic

There is a scene in Hardy's *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, which may epitomize Hardy's dilemma probably better than any other. The scene also reveals precisely the predicament of a world that has forsaken the true God who has uniquely revealed His love in Jesus Christ.

In *A Pair of Blue Eyes* two men are in love with one woman—Elfride. While Elfride is watching for the ocean steamer that is bringing one of them home (Stephen Smith, to whom she first promised marriage), she has fallen in love with the second one, Henry Knight. While Henry and Elfride scan the horizon, he slips and falls over a precipice. Henry hangs on for dear life.

While Henry is hanging on for his life, his eyes turn to see a trilobite fossil embedded in the cliffside (symbolizing the recent emergence of a Darwinian world-view). Obviously the skeletal remains can do nothing to save Knight from his life-threatening predicament. In other words, evolution provides no salvation, no ultimate answer.



Knight's rescue finally comes when Elfride moves away from the scene and removes all of her (extensive Victorian) underwear so as to weave it rapidly into a rescue-rope. It is sensually suggestive. (Thus, the only salvation in this pessimistic post-Darwinian world is the sex-and-love relationship between the genders, Hardy implies.)

This scene speaks volumes. What's left to make life tolerable in a Darwinian world? With a supernatural genesis abandoned and no supernatural afterlife guaranteed, Hardy logically proceeds to the natural genesis of human life—namely, sexual romance. (We have not explored this major Hardyan sub-theme here, but Hardy has been called “the father of the modern sex novel”<sup>20</sup> although his writings on this score are relatively tame by comparison with today's uninhibited pornographic explicitness.)

Without the invasive grace of God, what does an unbeliever have to live for? As T. S. Eliot put it in *Sweeney Agonistes*:

“Birth, and copulation, and death.

That's all the facts when you come to brass tacks:

Birth, and copulation, and death.”<sup>21</sup>

I believe that reading an agnostic such as Thomas Hardy should make a believer's heart bleed for the raw and pained condition of a thinking-and-feeling unbeliever. The deplorable end-run of Hardy's philosophy is fleshed out by his own tragic character, Little Father Time, who committed suicide.

No wonder Hardy spoke of “the ache of modernism.” Should we not feel for those who live unhappily now and, unless they put their faith in Jesus and His atonement, will live *unhappily ever after*? Like Thomas Hardy, his character Angel Clare had forsaken his evangelical roots. Therefore, Angel Clare experienced the “chronic melancholy which is taking hold of the civilized races with a decline of a belief in a beneficent Power.”<sup>22</sup>

One of the most poignant passages in Hardy is when the about-to-be-hanged Tess says to her lover Angel Clare: “Do you think we shall meet again after we are dead?” (*Tess*, chap 58). To this question Angel, the modernist or religious liberal, has nothing to say. What a contrast

<sup>20</sup> Hawkins, *Hardy the Novelist*, 67.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Stuart Barton Babbage, *Man in Nature and Grace* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1957), 98.

<sup>22</sup> *The Genius of Thomas Hardy*, 57.

with the apostle Paul, who buoyantly asserted that while "*they*...have no hope," "*we* believe that Jesus died and rose again," and so *we* shall "meet the Lord in the air. And thus *we* shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thess 4:13, 14, 17).

Thomas Hardy the agnostic is a parable of the tragedy of a life without Christ.

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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*In Defense of the Faith: Biblical Answers to Challenging Questions.* By Dave Hunt. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1996. 347 pp. Paper, \$11.99.

Hunt's full and well-researched book seeks to answer the hard questions on the Bible and on conservative, evangelical Christianity in this organized and interesting volume.

Part of the success of the text is due to the frequent documented quotations from the groups he is refuting, whether New Agers, Mormons, Roman Catholics, or liberals. For example, on the question of assurance of salvation, he quotes Cardinal O'Connor of New York: "I can hope, pray, do my very best—but I still don't know. Pope John Paul II doesn't know absolutely that he will go to heaven, nor does Mother Teresa of Calcutta" (p. 314).

Next Hunt quotes God's Word in 1 John 5:13, with which our GES family agrees: "that you may know that you have eternal life."

The author refutes all the current teachings that contradict salvation by grace—such as Mormon, Muslim, and atheist. Hunt is clear in answering a Roman Catholic seeker confused not only by Rome's teaching, but also by the welter of Protestant views: "Your very question 'What must I do to be saved?' was asked of the apostle Paul. His concise answer is the truth you seek: 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.' (Acts 16:30-31)."

For a Bible Christian, this book is loaded with quotations, apologetics, and other helps. Needless to say, since so many doctrines are covered, you may not agree with some of them, but the book is well worth the price and more.

Arthur L. Farstad

Editor

*Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*

Dallas, TX



*Historical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles.* By William M. Ramsay. Ed. by Mark Wilson. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1996. 160 pp. Paper, \$9.99.

Many religious writers have doubted or denied the historical reliability of at least parts of the Bible. Few, however, have gone out to test these theories as did Sir William Ramsay (1851-1939). His good results are known to many, but not to enough, as F. F. Bruce pointed out. Sir William studied at Aberdeen and Oxford and was the first professor of classical art and archaeology at Oxford. He traveled in Paul's footsteps and found in his archeological research that Luke was very accurate in his use of local terms in the book of Acts.

In a sense, this helpful book is a reprint, though it was not originally a book, but 31 essays from 1909-1911 in *The Expositor*, Seventh Series. By careful editing Wilson has produced a modern, readable, and conservative volume.

Ramsay was politically incorrect: He believed Paul wrote these letters.

His view on church leaders is that they were special, but not a separate class in the clergy/laity bifurcation that began to evolve in the late first or early second centuries, especially in Asia (Province). He believed elders held office for life, barring a very major failing. Also, he held that each presbyter must have all the qualifications that Paul lists in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

Some of the interesting topics that Sir William covers are: False Teachers, the Idea of Motherhood in the Letters of Paul, Deaconesses, Slaves, the Family as the Basis of the Organized Church, and the Pauline Philosophy of History as Expressed in the Pastoral Epistles.

Those who appreciated Ramsay's classics, *St. Paul the Traveller and Roman Citizen*, *Historical Commentary on Galatians*, and *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, will want this book.

Arthur L. Farstad

Editor

*Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*  
Dallas, TX

*Witnesses in Stone: Landmarks and Lessons from the Living God.* By Frederic R. Howe. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1996. 144 pp. Paper, \$8.99.

There is an old Jewish story that when God was creating the earth He assigned two angels to drop stones all over the earth. Each angel got a huge sack of stones and they were sent out flying over the planet. One angel successfully got his stones evenly "sprinkled" over the earth; the second angel had a little accident: his bag broke over Palestine! This story seems not too far-fetched to the tourist in the Holy Land who is viewing the stony, rock-strewn terrain. Dr. Howe, in 12 interesting and practical chapters, has produced a book quite unlike any I've seen before, giving spiritual lessons from some of the rocks and stones in the lives of Jacob, Moses, and Joshua. Some of these stony stories are well-known, such as Jacob's rather hard "pillow" at Bethel, the Rock that Moses struck with his rod in the wilderness, and the "Sentinels in Stone," as Howe calls them, to commemorate Israel's crossing the Jordan.

Each chapter ends with "Points to Ponder"—a lesson, an action the reader can take, a suggested Scripture to memorize, and questions for review and discussion. This little volume is refreshingly unique and I recommend it for Bible classes, Sunday schools, and private meditation.

Arthur L. Farstad

Editor

*Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*  
Dallas, TX

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*More Than One Way? Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World.* Edited by Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995. 283 pp. Paper, \$16.99.

*More Than One Way?* is a unique volume in that it includes the perspective of liberal pluralist John Hick. The book contains four different perspectives. Hick contends for Unitive Pluralism, the idea that all religions are on an equal footing before God and provide salvation in their own right.

Clark Pinnock presents Inclusivism, arguing that Jesus Christ is the *ground* of all salvation but that He does not need to be *known* by the one being saved.

Alister E. McGrath represents a Particularist view, insisting that one must knowingly trust in Christ as Savior to obtain eternal life. He believes that God is not restricted to using humans to preach the gospel but can use other means for reaching people who would otherwise never hear of Christ. This may entail visions and dreams.

The fourth view, that of R. Douglas Geivett and W. Gary Phillips, contends for a Particularist view that is more exclusive than that of Alister McGrath. They argue from the Bible for the existence of a personal God who is exclusive from a philosophical perspective. They were the only ones to give careful exegesis of John 3:16, 18; 14:6; 17:20, Acts 4:12, and Rom 10:9-15. Geivett/Phillips state categorically that people must hear the gospel from a human evangelist to be saved, seeing there is no other possibility from a biblical perspective.

The evangelical authors refute pluralists on a philosophical level. Pluralism is based on skepticism, which refutes their own truth claims as well as that of others. If all truth is relative then so is the proposition that all truth is relative! Pluralists also approach other religions from the perspective that they alone can see the truth behind all of them. They are the only ones who can see that all the religions are trying to explain the same unknowable Real/Ultimate Being. The other authors rightly ask, given his philosophical presuppositions, how Hicks can know that, since he also suffers from self-contradiction. If we cannot know anything about God then neither can John Hick!

Hick also denies the incarnation and deity of Christ. He recognizes that if Jesus was God in the flesh on earth then Christianity is uniquely true and is God's way for everyone to come to Him. Since this does not fit his pluralism, he argues for an evolutionary growth of the doctrine of the deity of Christ in the early church. The evangelical authors rightly point out that he was a pluralist first before he came to his conviction of Christ. Because of space limitations they could only point to scholarly studies on Christ and the Bible in defense of the inspiration of Scripture and the Deity of Christ.

Hick brings up one argument not adequately answered by the other writers: If Christianity is the only true way and it alone has the Holy Spirit, then why don't we see an observable difference in the morals of Christians as opposed to adherents of other religions? He feels that it is not noticeable, which indicates that all people have a relationship with the ultimate. The evangelical authors point out that morals do not settle the truth question. Someone can believe something false and be a nice person. Geivett/Phillips point out that all are sinners before God and



that the moral superiority of Christianity is attested in the sinless life of Christ as opposed to that of fallible Christians. Pinnock does mention that the fruits of the Christian Gospel—human rights, democracy, care of the sick and poor, and self giving service—are much better than that of Islam (which tends to produce intolerant governments) and that of Eastern religions (which produce stagnant societies). I would add that in Hinduism a person's suffering is seen as its way of working off "Karmic debt." To alleviate the suffering of another would postpone their "salvation." In *Mere Christianity* C. S. Lewis points out that people need to be taken individually. What would a person with a lot of problems be like if he were not a Christian? Or what would a "nice" person be like if she *were* a Christian? Many "good" people don't see their need for Christ precisely because they *are* nice. People with big flaws in their lives often see their need for Christ much sooner. Christ *does* make an observable difference in the lives of those who desire to walk with Him. However as I have worked with Muslims and Hindus, I have observed a difference in the area of honesty and integrity in their lives. This is the experience of every other missionary that I have spoken to. So I would directly challenge Hick's premise not only on its relativity but its accuracy.

The bulk of the responses by the authors was directed toward refuting pluralism. There were, however, comments made on every perspective. *More Than One Way?* is a good book with which to get a handle on the various views on this subject.

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*A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions.* By Clark H. Pinnock. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992. 217 pp. Paper, \$16.99.

Clark Pinnock writes in response to John Hick's pluralism and the exclusivism of most Evangelicals. His book has two main parameters within which he feels a theology of religions should operate. The first is

that God loves all mankind and desires to save them. This should produce optimism that many will be saved. The second axiom is that Jesus Christ is Lord and the only basis on which men are saved. Christ is the *basis* for salvation but people don't need to *know* about Him in order to receive the eternal life He provided. These two axioms form his first two chapters. The first chapter proves only that God desires the salvation of mankind. Unfortunately, Pinnock feels that this is evidence that God will save people who do not have a specific knowledge of Christ. However, the passages only say that God desires them to be saved. There are other passages that point out that salvation comes only through Jesus Christ (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). The second chapter is a good refutation of John Hick's christology by affirming that Christ is the basis for the salvation of all humanity.

The third chapter discusses the distinction between subjective and objective religion. This is an important part of Pinnock's theology, allowing him to say that people who respond subjectively to God (faith, piety, worship, and fear of God) can be saved even though they know nothing of Christ and are in a false religion. He believes they are saved because they responded to the revelation that they did receive. Two major problems he never addresses in his view are: (1) He smuggles the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition in through the back door. How can a Hindu really respond to the God of the Bible when his concept of God is totally different? (2) The second objection is similar in that it's difficult to see how an unbeliever would be able to choose the correct beliefs about God out of a false religion. The distinctions between subjective and objective faith are overemphasized. People exercise their subjective faith in the context of their objective faith (the religion itself). Their concept of God and everything else is shaped by their belief system. Pinnock never addresses these insurmountable problems with his view. In fact, when these people do respond to the God of the Bible they have taken their first step *away* from their religion!

The fourth chapter discusses the need to dialogue with the adherents of other religions. Through dialogue we can understand them better and build bridges into their religion so that we can reach them with the gospel of Christ.

The last chapter is the author's view of how men who have never heard about Christ can be saved. He couples his view of subjective faith with what is called the "faith-principle." In Pinnock's system "faith" is almost completely empty of content. This is necessary so that people of other religions can be saved. He uses Abel, Noah, Job, Melchizedek,

Abram, Jethro, and other OT figures as evidence that people can be saved without a specific knowledge of Christ. The main problem with his examples is that none of these people was saved by natural revelation: all responded to special revelation, oral or written. He also assumes that they were adherents of other religions. This, however, is false. While not part of Judaism, which had not started yet, they did believe in the special revelation God had given to them as well as their predecessors. They were worshipers of Yahweh and not adherents of false religions.

Pinnock also argues that since babies and mentally incompetent people are saved apart from believing in Christ so are those who have never heard. But there is a big difference between people who are *unable* to believe and those who are mature and reject the light God has given them (Rom 1:18-19ff.).

This book has made quite an impression in the academic community. For those interested in defending specific knowledge of Jesus Christ as necessary in order to receive eternal life, it is must reading.

R. Michael Duffy

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*Philosophers Who Believe: The Spiritual Journeys of Eleven Leading Thinkers.* Ed. by Kelly James Clark. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993. 276 pp. Cloth, \$24.99.

We live in a skeptical age. And there is no more skeptical crowd living in our skeptical age than philosophers! That's one of the factors that makes *Philosophers Who Believe* so intriguing and encouraging. To read about 11 well-known and respected philosophers from around the world who have come to some semblance of faith in Christ—more about this in a moment—tells the doubter, "If they can believe, so can I."

Several elements make this work stand out. First, the writers not only share their *reasons* for faith in Jesus Christ, but also tell the *story* of their journey to the point of faith. I was profoundly touched by entering the personal world of these great thinkers, to feel their fears, weaknesses, and pain, and to see them humbly wind up at the doorway of faith. After reading such human accounts of the struggle to believe, never again



should even atheistic philosophers intimidate the doubting Christian. They will simply be seen as intelligent human beings with a huge God-shaped vacuum crying out to be filled with Him.

Second, each writer makes it very clear that while there are substantial evidences that brought them to the door of faith, it was spiritual experience that compelled them to walk through the door. Doubters searching for a final, airtight *intellectual* argument from these seasoned thinkers will need to look elsewhere. Christianity is reasonable, they say, but it was God's personal touch that convinced them of His reality. Of course, a completely or primarily experiential faith can lead to problems. But many doubters are compulsive about finding all the answers to every tough question. These intellectuals remind us that God is personal and that a credible part of the validation of our faith concerns how He meets us daily in relationship. In this truth, doubting readers will find a measure of the freedom from doubt they are seeking.

A third strength deals with the sheer intellectual weight of the contributing authors. These men and women are brilliant and are seen as such by the secular world. This gives the book an apologetic appeal for use in pre-evangelism with intellectually oriented non-believers.

One final strength of this work is the challenge it issues to modern evangelicalism to minister the gospel in a skeptical world. Several of the authors decry a general American trend away from dealing with the hard philosophical questions offered by contemporary society and call us to be ready with reasonable answers to honest inquirers.

But with all its strengths, *Philosophers Who Believe* has one major weakness: The gospel is muddled, often confused, and sometimes misstated. This doesn't mean there are no flashes of clarity! But they are followed just as quickly by sometimes even contradictory statements. For example, Fredrick Suppe (whose story is particularly touching) one moment says correctly that "if one can be justified by good works and cultivating the virtues, then Jesus' death was gratuitously unnecessary" (p. 174). He also says, "I know that I can be saved only through the grace of God ... and cannot merit everlasting life by my own efforts" (p. 175). Yet on the same page he fears falling away from his faith because of the probable result: "I'll lose the resurrection gift; I'll be damned" (p. 175).

The authors who come from the sacramental traditions are especially unclear in their gospel statements. In fact, in some cases, their conversion seems to be more to the church or Christendom than to Jesus Christ. Perhaps more disappointing is the confusing language of the philosophers from a Reformed background who do lift up the name of Jesus,

but still confuse the terms of the gospel. For example, Stephen Davis uses "commit" in place of "believe or trust" of his own conversion, yet in another place writes of "accepting Christ." On the one hand, Nicholas Wolterstorff says, "Authentic faith transforms us; it leads us to sell all and follow the Lord" (p. 267), an obvious allusion to the need (in his mind) for perseverance in order to have assurance of salvation. Yet in another very moving section, quoting the Heidelberg Catechism as his own, he writes that his only comfort in life and death is "that I am not my own but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ" (p. 261). Obviously these authors are sincere in their devotion to Christ. But from a gospel perspective, they are at least confused on the terms of how to come to Christ.

All this to say that the strength of this work is not its theological precision or its clarity on the gospel. *Philosophers Who Believe* wins because of the impact of the personal stories of these great thinkers on the reader, especially the reader who struggles with doubt.

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*Are You Going to Heaven?* Sacramento, CA: Double Vision Productions, 1994. 35-minute video. \$19.95.

The title of this video is catchy. There are a number of fine things about it as well. The production quality is good; this is not something put together hastily. It has an appealing, professional look to it. The interviews and the dramatic re-enactments are thought-provoking.

On a number of points it is also theologically sound. The Lord Jesus is shown as the only way to God. No one can be saved via any other religion or way. Hell is presented as a real place which will involve real torment forever. The Bible is put forth as the only reliable source of truth about what one must do to go to heaven. The video encourages new believers to start by reading the Gospel of John, a good suggestion. It also rightly urges them when they do read to ask God to open His Word to their understanding.

The video moves from the question in the title, "Are you going to heaven?" to the question of why people *think* they will go to heaven. This is helpful. The video then focuses on the various answers people typically give and shows why each response is inconsistent with the Bible. Again, this is good. While one could have wished for a bit more clarity in places, up to this point the video is quite helpful.

This leads to the things I found needed improvement in the video. When it came to the evangelistic close, the "fuzz factor" kicked in. Rather than telling the viewers, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31), they are told to have faith (which they say is not belief, but which is saying "yes" with your life), repent, follow Christ, and confess Him before men. Following Christ is mentioned repeatedly as a condition of going to heaven. Evidently the producers of the video feel this is the most important of the conditions they list. Confusion in the evangelistic close is especially sad since, up to this point, the presentation was well done.

The much-used Niagara Falls tightrope-walker illustration, which is a favorite of many (and one I myself once used!), is given to show that true faith is more than believing the facts of the gospel. Commitment of life is needed to have true biblical faith in Christ, they suggest. Needless to say, I found this disappointing.

Overall, I can't recommend this video as a tool to lead unbelievers to Christ. However, it *would* make a nice training video for an evangelism course to show the importance of ending one's gospel presentation clearly and biblically.

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## PERIODICAL REVIEWS

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**“The Dispensational View of the Davidic Kingdom: A Response to Progressive Dispensationalism,”** Stephen J. Nichols, *The Master’s Seminary Journal*, Fall 1996, pp. 213-39.

As a graduate of Dallas Seminary before the birth of Progressive Dispensationalism (hereafter PD), I have followed with interest this new development. Frankly, however, I have found this movement to be difficult to understand.

Nichols has put forward a helpful review and critique of PD. He compares and contrasts the writings of Blaising and Bock in their presentation of PD to the writings of old-line Dispensationalists such as Darby, Scofield, Feinberg, Chafer, McClain, Ryrie, and Walvoord.

Several major distinctives between PD and Dispensationalism are cited by Nichols:

1. Dispensationalism teaches that the Davidic kingdom was offered to and rejected by Israel, and that as a result of this rejection the kingdom has been postponed until after the Church Age. These things (the offer, rejection, and postponement of the Davidic Kingdom) are absent from PD.
2. Dispensationalism teaches that Jesus *will be* seated on David’s throne at the start of the Millennium. PD teaches that Jesus *has been* seated on David’s throne since His ascension.
3. Dispensationalism teaches that Jesus *will not begin* His rule as the Davidic King *until after* the Tribulation. PD teaches that on the one hand Jesus *already* rules as the Davidic King, in a spiritual sense, today, but on another hand, He is *not yet* physically ruling over that Kingdom.
4. As a consequence of the previous points, Nichols finds “absent [from PD] is the view that the church is distinct from [the Davidic] kingdom” (p. 235). “*The distinguishing feature of dispensationalism, i.e., the consistent distinction between Israel and the church, is all but absent*” (p. 239).

The conclusion of Nichols is a bit startling: “A better view of PD takes it as a departure from normative dispensationalism rather than a future development or refinement” (p. 232). He writes further: “The legitimacy

of calling PD part of the dispensational tradition is questionable” (p. 239).

Nichols does not discuss one point that most *JOTGES* readers are most interested in: PD and the gospel. Does PD take any stand in the area of soteriology (the doctrine of salvation)? We would love to see an examination of that important question. Since *The Master’s Seminary Journal* promotes Lordship Salvation Theology, that would certainly be a question in which it, too, would surely have great interest.

I recommend this article for those seeking to understand or better understand Progressive Dispensationalism.

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“*Adialeiptōs Proseuchesthe* [Pray Without Ceasing]: Is Paul Serious?,” Clay Smith, *Presbyterion*, Fall 1996, pp. 113-20.

Many English translations of 1 Thess 5:17 read, “pray without ceasing.” Smith discusses three possible renderings or understandings of this verse: 1) Individual churches (such as the congregation at Thessalonica) should have round-the-clock prayer vigils all the time. Prayers should literally ascend to God 24 hours a day every day from every church; 2) Individual Christians should pray often; 3) Individual Christians should continually set their minds on God and depend upon Him for everything in life.

Smith argues that Paul had in mind a *combination* of the second and third views, and he suggests that “the traditional translation of 1 Thessalonians 5:17 as ‘pray without ceasing’ seems to communicate the wrong idea to the English-speaking reader. There are two adverbs in English that might more effectively capture the idea being communicated by Paul; they are *persistently* and *constantly*” (p. 119).

The fact that Smith essentially argues for two different meanings for this verse is a bit confusing. In some places he argues that Paul was speaking literally of praying and of praying spontaneously and often throughout the day (e.g., pp. 118-19). In other places he suggests that

Paul wasn't talking literally about prayer, but about a constant *attitude of dependence* on God (e.g., pp. 118-19). He summarizes his view as follows: "[Paul] is encouraging us to persist in our recognition of our dependence on God *and to act accordingly, to pray*" (pp. 119-20, italics added).

It seems unlikely that Paul intended his readers to understand both of these things with his use of *proseuchomai*. It is much more likely that Paul was calling for persistent prayer, which is in keeping with our Lord's admonition in Luke 18:1-8. While it is surely true that we should constantly have our minds set in dependence upon God (cf. Gal 2:20), it is very unlikely that Paul had that in mind here in 1 Thess 5:17.

Despite this minor objection, I recommend this article. Anyone planning to teach or preach on this passage would be wise to read it.

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**"Partnership in the Gospel: The Role of Women in the Church at Philippi,"** A. Boyd Luter, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, September 1996, 411-20.

The author of this useful article, formerly of Talbot Seminary and now adjunct professor of Bible Exposition at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, proposes that "Philippians must be seen as an important but underdeveloped resource in the ongoing intramural debate among evangelicals on the ministry of women in the Church" (p. 411). He views Philippians as important, since it is "perhaps the classic NT case study on the roles of women in the founding and developing of a local congregation" (p. 411). He views its resources as "underdeveloped," despite a number of recent studies which he notes (and footnotes) on the subject.

As a result, in the two major divisions of the article he proposes to "further explore the relevant question of the nature of women's 'partnership in the gospel'" as revealed in (1) the Philippian letter itself and (2) in the flow of the narrative of Acts 16:12-40 (p. 411). In each of these two divisions he adduces eight lines of evidence that demonstrate the



importance and prominence of the Philippian women and their ministry efforts.

Notable by its absence from this treatment is any attempt to apply these observations to the contemporary questions and debates concerning what women ought or ought not to do in the church. I suspect that forthcoming material from Dr. Luter will address these issues. Here, however, he is content to set forth his sixteen observations derived from the text and to conclude that: (1) Philippians and Acts agree in clearly portraying women as notable, with key roles in the church's ministry; (2) Philippians tactfully but effectively addresses a growing dispute between two well-known, well-respected women (Euodia and Syntyche) without overbearing harshness; (3) both Acts 16 and Philippians agree in portraying women who are effective "partners in the gospel" (1:3) as worthy of the same respect as men who are also distinguished by these same qualities.

In brief, read this article for its orientation to the biblical text, not for a discussion of contemporary issues or problems. As such, however, it should provide a reference point from which to approach these issues in a biblical way. The studies footnoted serve as a ready reference to any who desire to pursue the issues in greater depth.

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**"Current Hermeneutical Trends: Toward Explanation or Obfuscation?"** Robert L. Thomas, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39 (June 1996), 241-56.

Recent theories in the practice of biblical interpretation have taken new directions that should concern all Christians. These negative trends are all the more alarming because the new hermeneutical channels are being navigated by Evangelicals. To be specific, objections are being raised against the traditional grammatico-historical method of interpretation. These first appeared in the early 1980s among missiologists and feminists. In the 1990s, however, the same challenges have shown up in the writings of theological and biblical scholars. According to Thomas's perceptive analysis, these challenges are currently only theoretical, but harmful practical ramifications may soon follow.

Using numerous short citations, the author catalogs the widely variant and confusing definitions proposed for four key terms: *hermeneutics*, *exegesis*, *meaning*, and *interpretation*. In some cases, one term (e.g., hermeneutics) has been defined by several of the same definitions given by other scholars for *another* term (e.g., exegesis). Comparable obscurities can be found in the definitions of all four terms. Thomas laments how hermeneutics specialists have assigned new definitions to traditional terms without a clear warning of doing so.

The development of these conflicting definitions in hermeneutics is traced to 1) the infiltration of philosophy and linguistic theory, and 2) Immanuel Kant's eighteenth century dualistic view of reality (subjective over against objective reality) which some Evangelicals are now embracing. The outcome has been a dissatisfaction with the goal of discovering the *author's* intent and a rise of the prominence of the *interpreter's* preunderstanding as the starting point for modern hermeneutics.

Once again, no agreement can be found among hermeneutical specialists concerning a definition of *preunderstanding*. Nevertheless, they do agree on one fact: Interpretive conclusions must be held tentatively. But, as Thomas notes, this relativism divests Scripture of its truth claims, and will eventually lead to the questioning of cardinal evangelical doctrines. Instead of overemphasizing human limitations in interpretation, the interpreter must understand the exegetical task is always one of incompleteness and ongoing refinement.

Thomas offers several parting suggestions for hermeneutical specialists: 1) come to an agreement on terminology or return to traditional definitions; 2) come to an agreement on the nature of *preunderstanding*, or (better still) drop the subject altogether; 3) exclude the emphasis on human limitations drawn from linguistics, philosophy, missiology, etc.; and 4) avoid a focus on the subjective, and refocus on the objective potential in hermeneutics.

*JOTGES* readers will find a passing remark by Thomas (p. 254) to be bothersome. He comments that a true Christian "has an anointing that frees him from misunderstandings that cause some professing Christians to wander away from the truth (1 John 2:20)." If his understanding of 1 John 2:20 is correct, then why does he make an effort to warn true believers not to wander away from the truth of the grammatico-historical method? According to his interpretation that could never happen. In fact, if a believer "has an anointing that frees him from misunderstanding," wouldn't all believers be *infallible* interpreters of God's Word?

Thomas's own warning suggests that a different understanding of 1 John 2:20 is surely correct (see Zane Hodges, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, p. 892).

I recommend this article. It is well documented, provocative, and long overdue.

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## A HYMN OF GRACE

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## WONDERFUL GRACE OF JESUS

Wonderful grace of Jesus, greater than all my sin;  
How shall my tongue describe it, where shall its praise begin?  
Taking away my burden, setting my spirit free,  
For the wonderful grace of Jesus reaches me!

Wonderful grace of Jesus, reaching to all the lost,  
By it I have been pardoned, saved to the uttermost;  
Chains have been torn asunder, giving me liberty,  
For the wonderful grace of Jesus reaches me!

Wonderful grace of Jesus, reaching the most defiled,  
By its transforming power, making him God's dear child.  
Purchasing peace and heaven for all eternity;  
And the wonderful grace of Jesus reaches me!

REFRAIN: Wonderful the matchless grace of Jesus,  
Deeper than the mighty rolling sea;  
Higher than the mountain, sparkling like a fountain,  
All-sufficient grace for even me;  
Broader than the scope of my transgressions,  
Greater far than all my sin and shame;  
O magnify the precious name of Jesus, praise His name!

—Haldor Lillenas (1885-1959)

“Wonderful Grace of Jesus”—the very title proclaims from the outset and at the beginning of each stanza that this hymn by Haldor Lillenas is a hymn of *grace*. First introduced in 1918, this song has become a favorite across denominational lines in the Church today. Its upbeat,

bouncy meter and somewhat unusual refrain, which splits into two parts, with the melody alternating between the bass/tenor and alto/soprano parts, endear the tune to many. However, as is often the case, the strong doctrinal message carried by the words of the hymn are often obscured in the enthusiasm for the music. In fact, the author himself, in his autobiography, cautions against distorting the words of the hymn by performing it at *too rapid a tempo*.<sup>1</sup>

Haldor Lillenas was born in Norway in 1885, but his family emigrated to America when he was a young child.<sup>2</sup> He was trained at Deets Pacific Bible College in Los Angeles, and became a pastor in the Church of the Nazarene. He received his musical training through personal study and correspondence courses. Eventually, Lillenas would obtain more renown through his musical endeavors than through his pastoral ministry. In 1925, while pastor of the First Church of the Nazarene in Indianapolis, he founded the Lillenas Publishing Company, which was later purchased by the Nazarene Publishing House, and became its music division. Over his lifetime Lillenas wrote more than 4,000 hymn texts and tunes, many of which are still in use today both by the Nazarene and by other denominations.

While at first glance "Wonderful Grace of Jesus" may seem to be simply a general song of praise to God for His grace, several of its phrases make it clear that the author understands not just the term but the substance of the grace of God. In the first stanza and the chorus, the surpassing nature of God's grace is set forth with the phrases "greater than all my sin" and "Broader than the scope of my transgressions, greater far than all my sin and shame" (Rom 5:20). It is grace, Lillenas proclaims, that takes away the burden of sin and liberates the captive soul.

In the second stanza, Lillenas demonstrates his understanding of the extent of God's grace. Not covering just a favored few, the grace of God reaches to "all the lost." People may choose to reject grace, but God extends the offer of salvation freely to all (Titus 2:11). Also in this stanza, and again in the chorus, the sufficiency of grace is described. Lillenas says he has been "saved to the uttermost" by an "all-sufficient grace." Lillenas's view of salvation by grace is not one of meeting God halfway, with both parties contributing to the transaction (Titus 3:5; Eph 2:8).

<sup>1</sup> Paul G. Hammond, "Wonderful Grace of Jesus," in *Handbook to The Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1992), 277-78.

<sup>2</sup> Hammond, "Lillenas, Haldor," *Ibid.*, 387.

His words here indicate an understanding that when Christ completed His work on the cross, salvation was finished (John 19:30), leaving nothing for man to do but accept the gift of grace and be completely saved.

The third stanza touches on another hallmark of the doctrine of grace—that regardless of the magnitude of one's sin, God's grace is available and is sufficient for salvation even to "the most defiled." This is reminiscent of Fanny Crosby's words in "To God be the Glory"<sup>3</sup> when she wrote "The vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus a pardon receives."

The words of this third stanza may strike some as inconsistent with Lillenas's Nazarene theology. While members of GES generally recognize that ultimate sanctification will occur only in the presence of the Lord in Heaven, Nazarene theology teaches a doctrine of "entire sanctification," in which the believer can and should obtain complete sanctification in this life.<sup>4</sup> Connected to this doctrine is the Nazarene teaching that apostasy in the life of a believer can result in the loss of salvation. Thus, for the Nazarene, there is no true doctrine of eternal security, as promulgated by GES. This makes Lillenas's words in the third stanza even more interesting, when he writes "Purchasing peace and heaven *for all eternity*," and even in the second stanza where he tells us that we have been "saved *to the uttermost*" (*italics added*). While these words may have meant something quite different to Lillenas, they seem equally applicable to *our* understanding of God's grace in salvation, sanctification, and security.

"Wonderful Grace of Jesus" combines doctrinal truth with a buoyant melody and serves as a good vehicle for teaching the doctrine of grace. It touches on the availability, sufficiency, and efficacy of the salvation offered by grace through faith in Christ, and so carries an appropriate message for believer and unbeliever alike. Though we should be aware that Lillenas's own theology may not line up completely with that of most GES readers, his words do carry the Gospel of grace, making this hymn worthy of the category "A Hymn of Grace."

<sup>3</sup> Reviewed in *JOTGES* (Spring 96), 97-99.

<sup>4</sup> *Manual* (1993-1997), *Church of the Nazarene* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1993), 26-45.





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## BOOKS RECEIVED

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*Biblical Authority and Conservative Perspectives.* Douglas Moo, general ed. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1997. Pp. 240. \$11.99 (paper).

BOYD, ROBERT. *Boyd's Handbook of Practical Apologetics.* Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1997. Pp. 264. \$12.99 (paper).

BUTT, HOWARD E., JR. *Renewing America's Soul: A Spiritual Psychology for Home, Work, and Nation.* New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1996. Pp. 249. \$19.95 (cloth).

CAMPBELL, J. McLEOD. *The Nature of the Atonement.* Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996. Pp. x + 294. \$25.00 (cloth).

*Dictionary of Premillennial Theology.* Mal Couch, general ed. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1996. Pp. 435. \$22.99 (cloth).

EDGAR, WILLIAM. *Reasons of the Heart: Recovering Christian Persuasion.* Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996. Pp. 128. \$7.99 (paper).

EVANS, C. STEPHEN. *Why Believe?: Reason and Mystery as Pointers to God.* Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996. Pp. x + 154. \$13.00 (paper).

HETTINGA, JAN DAVID. *Follow Me: Experience the Loving Leadership of Jesus.* Colorado Springs: NavPress Publishing Group, 1996. Pp. 267. \$14.00 (paper).

HEWITT, JOE. *I Was Raised a Jehovah's Witness.* Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1997. Pp. 190. \$9.99 (paper).

HUNT, DAVE. *In Defense of the Faith: Biblical Answers to Challenging Questions.* Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1996. Pp. 347. \$11.99 (paper).

HYBELS, BILL. *The God You're Looking For*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997. Pp. 199. \$21.99 (cloth).

KENDALL, R. T. *Are You Stone Deaf to the Spirit or Rediscovering God?* Christian Focus Publications: Scotland, U. K., 1994. Pp. 255 \$9.99 (paper).

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MALPHURS, AUBREY. *Strategy 2000: Churches Making Disciples for the Next Millennium*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1996. Pp. 216. \$11.99 (paper).

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