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Did God Hide Himself? *Romans 1:18-21, Part 1*

By P. S. Nelson

Romans 1:18-21

(18) For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; (19) Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. (20) For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: (21) Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened.

The atheistic philosopher Bertrand Russell was asked, "What would happen if you die and immediately find yourself before God? What will you say?" He responded, "I would say to him, not enough evidence! Not enough evidence!" More recently renowned atheist Richard Dawkins (ring leader of the new atheism) was interviewed by Ben Stein in the movie "Expelled" and asked, "What if after you died, and ran into God, and he asked you, 'What have you been doing Richard?'" He answered by paraphrasing Bertrand Russell, "Sir why did you take such pain to hide yourself?"

Are the arguments from these men valid - Did God hide himself? The answer to this question is readily found in Romans 1:18-21. The following eight arguments will prove that man has no warrant to charge God with hiding himself. The arguments will expose the utter folly and self-deception of Russell and Dawkins. "They are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20).

God's Wrath Revealed (v. 18)

Roman 1:18 begins with "for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven." We note that it is a revelation of God's wrath, and not of his love. In the Grk., "revealed" (ἀποκαλύπτεται) is placed first in word order for emphasis. It means to "disclose" and "to make manifest." Beyond any question, God's wrath, that is, his divine anger and judgment against sin, is revealed from heaven. It is a divine revelation universally given to every person. The apostle Paul uses the verb "revealed" in the present tense, denoting that "God's wrath" is continually being revealed to all men. This verb also occurs in the passive voice denoting that God himself does the revealing. Man is the recipient. God's divine anger is revealed "against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men."

Next, Paul describes man's reaction to the revelation of God's wrath. He says, "who hold the truth in unrighteousness." The Grk. verb for "hold" is κατεχόντων which literally means to "hold down" (from κατα - down, and εχω - to hold). It is a deliberate act of suppressing the truth of God. And it is done "in unrighteousness." There is no neutrality or innocence in suppressing the truth; it is done deliberately and wickedly. The present tense of the verb "to hold down" denotes continual action. The unregenerate are habitually suppressing "the truth" (τὴν ἀλήθειαν) that has been clearly revealed to them in creation about the existence of God, his nature, and his moral character. The rest of Romans chapter one is but an explanation of this.

Why does man continually suppress the truth creation reveals about God? Because to the unconverted it is a terrible reality to be accountable for one's

sin and therefore he must deny it at all cost. He must suppress it to justify the way he lives his life. Yet despite all the denials, God continues to reveal his righteous moral character to man every moment of every day. It is inescapable.

The Internal Revelation of God (v. 19)

Verse 19 deals with the internal aspect of natural revelation.² Here we find that God not only reveals himself to man but in man. Paul says, this knowledge of God is manifest “in them” (ἐν αὐτοῖς), i.e., in their hearts and minds, within the very constitution of their nature. It is not a nebulous and hazy knowledge; it is clearly manifested “in them.”

Man possesses a general knowledge of God by virtue of being created in the image of God; it is a knowledge that is innate and intuitive within him. A sense of deity (*sensus divinitatus*) has been implanted within the human mind of all men. It is stamped on man’s innermost being. Therefore, because man was made a morally rational creature as God’s image bearer, he morally apprehends the manifestations of God in his works of creation and providence. He understands the moral character and judgment of God against sin. This is not an acquired knowledge of God; it is something that is inborn. It is part of man’s very being.

The External Revelation of God (v. 20)

What are the “invisible things of him” that the apostle Paul says the unbeliever knows about God? Paul tells us they are “his eternal power and Godhead.” The term “Godhead” in the Grk. (θεϊότης) is a collective term for all the divine perfections, i.e., the invisible attributes of God. The apostle makes special note of God’s “eternal power” (τε ἀίδιος αὐτοῦ δύναμις) revealed in his works of creation. Both terms are joined together as an expressive unit in the original language.³ We see that natural revelation does not just reveal the existence of God, but God’s divinity - his nature and character. Man apprehends this knowledge “by the things that are made.” For all of creation is a revelation of God. “The heavens declare the glory

of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork” (Ps. 19:1). God has left his imprint on the entire created universe.⁴ The knowledge of God is embedded in creation itself.

Paul says, “the invisible things of him” are “clearly seen.” The Grk. verb “clearly seen” (καθοράται) has reference to looking down from above and it means “to see thoroughly,” i.e., to have a full comprehension. Man clearly sees the invisible things of God, his existence, his divine perfections, his attributes and his eternal power. All men have this knowledge. It is a true knowledge of God, albeit, not a saving knowledge of God.

Furthermore, the phrase “being understood by the things that are made” explains how the invisible things of God are clearly seen. The Grk. participle “being understood” (νοούμενα)⁵ gives the sense of being intellectually apprehended (different than the process of reasoning). It refers to an inner perception.⁶ It depicts an immediate and intuitive comprehension, something that is instinctive.

Thus by using νοούμενα, the apostle Paul is reinforcing the *sensus divinitatus* he has just introduced in v. 19, i.e., the knowledge of God manifested “in them” (ἐν αὐτοῖς). There is an apprehension of the Creator that is innate in the very nature and constitution of man. Man clearly sees the unseen. Moreover, both the verb (καθοράται, clearly seen) and participle (νοούμενα, being understood) are in the present tense denoting again that man is in continual possession of this general knowledge of God.

The Creator-creature Distinction (v. 21)

I want to draw your attention to the phrase “from the creation of the world” in v. 20. The noun “creation” (κτίσις) refers to the act of creation.⁷ When the apostle Paul states in v. 20, “For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made,” he is asserting the absolute reality of the Creator. The visible creation of God’s handiwork, makes mani-

fest the invisible perfections of God as its Creator.⁸ Hence, the phrase “from the creation of the world” presupposes the self-existence of God prior to creation, i.e., his eternity. And it presupposes the transcendence of God, existing in absolute independence of his creation.

The works of God’s creation disclose an unavoidable relationship between God and man, a relationship that distinguishes between the Creator and the creature. The existence of man is wholly dependent upon God the Creator. “We live and move and have our being in him” (Act 17:28). Moreover, it is an ethical relationship, defined by the moral character of God. His anger against sin has been sufficiently revealed. God owns everything in creation; all things were created to serve him and his purposes (especially man). This is the ultimate reality of man’s existence.

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¹ Quoted from Scott Oliphint’s *The Battle Belongs to the LORD*, pp. 131-132.

² *Natural revelation* is a general knowledge of God universally revealed to all men. It is not salvific, i.e., a saving knowledge of God. The saving knowledge of God is attained only through God’s special revelation of scripture.

³ Granville-Sharp rule. See Dana and Mantey’s *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*, p. 147.

⁴ Morris, Leon, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI), 1988, p. 82.

⁵ Νοούμενα is the present passive participle of νοεω, which briefly defined is the use of νοός (the mind).

⁶ Morris, Leon, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI), 1988, p. 82.

⁷ Hodge, Charles, *Epistle to the Romans*, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI), 1950, p. 37.

⁸ Murray, John, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI), 1975, p. 39.

Church Membership¹ *The Act of Admission, Part 2*

By M. A. Carling

Acts 2:41, 47

Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were

added unto them about three thousand souls.

...And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.

In part 1, I asked the question, How did God add to the church daily such as should be saved and how does He do it now? In other words, what is the procedure, the mechanism, or the act of admission in the practical, day to day context of the local assembly? Is there any explicit or implicit statement or biblical principle in the Word of God from which we derive our practice of voting in members to our fellowship? If God is the one who adds to His church, do we, as a church, have the right or authority to vote members into fellowship?

To answer these questions I am looking at two things. First, the God ordained polity of a congregational government, and then secondly, the witness of history. We continue our look at congregational government under the third heading.

#3 The Congregation Has the Authority to Elect its Own Officers

In Acts 6:1-6, we find the biblical record of the origin of the deacon's office.

Acts 6:1-6 (1) And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations [or distribution of food]. (2) Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. (3) Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.

The apostles called the multitude together and instructed the whole congregation to "look ye out among you seven men." With an aor. imper., the congregation was given the urgent task of finding "seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom."

(4) But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word. (5) And the saying pleased the whole multi-

tude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch: (6) Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them.

Once these seven were determined by the assembly and "set before" the twelve, the twelve would "appoint" them (vs. 3) to the work. The word "appoint" is καθίστημι ("to set," "place," or "appoint one to administer an office.") The laying on of hands was merely symbolic.

In vs. (5) it states, "And the saying pleased the whole multitude..." This phrase carries the sense that the assembly unanimously voiced its agreement. The apostles proposed the number of men needed and their qualifications, and the church approved their suggestion. Although the apostles had unique authority, they always spoke in an advisory capacity and left the executive authority to be exercised by the local congregation. Then in vs. (5) it states, "...and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip,..." etc. The Greek verb for "chose" means to "pick out" "select" or "elect." The middle voice means "with reference to themselves." A good rendering would be, "they chose for themselves." Without question, there was a congregational deliberation of some kind for making this decision, and selecting the seven deacons. It is important to emphasize that the congregation made the selection which was accepted by the apostles. The assembly "set" the men before the apostles. After they had prayed, the apostles ratified the decision of the congregation by installing the seven men with the laying on of hands. The apostles appointed these men to their office, but it was only after the entire congregation had "chosen" them and "set them aside" for this work. One thing is very clear, the church, as a whole, was responsible for choosing these men. The apostles merely confirmed the choice.

In Acts 14:19-23 we find a reference to the appointing of elders.

Acts 14:19-23 (19) And there came thither certain Jews from Antioch and Iconium, who persuaded the people, and, having stoned Paul, drew him out of the city, supposing he had been dead. (20) Howbeit, as the disciples stood round about him, he rose up, and came into the city: and the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe. (21) And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch, (22) Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God. (23) And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.

In vs. (23), the Greek participle used for "ordained" properly means "to elect by vote." Literally, "to vote by stretching out the hand." According to A. T. Robertson, "...[it] is an old verb that originally meant to vote by show of the hands, finally to appoint with the approval of an assembly that chooses..."² The same verb is used in 2 Cor. 8:19 where it is clear that the church used some procedure or mechanism to determine a consensus.

There is some debate as to who appointed the elders in vs. (23). According to Horatio B. Hackett,

"Whether Paul and Barnabas appointed the presbyters [elders] in this case by their own act solely, or ratified a previous election of the churches made at their suggestion, is disputed. If it be clear from other sources that the primitive churches elected their officers by general suffrage, the verb here may be understood to denote a concurrent appointment, in accordance with that practice...but the burden of proof lies on those who contend for such a modification of the meaning."³

But then, according to J. M. Pendleton,

"Some think that William Tyndale's translation comes nearer to the meaning of the original. With the spelling modernized, it is as follows: 'And when they had ordained them seniors by election, in every congregation, after they had prayed and fasted, they commended them to God, on whom they believed.' Tyndale puts in the words 'by election,' believing, as he did, that the NT churches

elected their elders by votes of the members. He and others believed that ‘...the apostles did not thrust pastors into the church through a lordly superiority, but chose and placed them there by the voice of the congregation.’”⁴

Even though the text says the apostles “ordained” the elders, it is very unrealistic to assume that they did so without any involvement of the respective congregations. The best interpretation is that Paul and Barnabus superintended the elections and confirmed it by a public appointment. They had appointed elders for them in every church, that is, for the respective church that chose them. This follows the precedent already established in Acts 6 in the selection of the seven deacons. Although nothing is said of procedure, it is reasonable to conclude that Paul and Barnabas simply ratified the previous elections of the churches.

The Witness of History

Does the witness of history help answer the question concerning the practical methodology of receiving members into the church?

John Angell James, an English Nonconformist and a decided Calvinist, states in his work *The Church Member's Guide* of 1822 concerning the act of discipline,

“At the time the deputation is appointed, a resolution ought to be passed, suspending the individual from the privileges of communion.

Footnote: The suspension from the table, which is denominated the lesser excommunication, is opposed by some as a measure that has no Scripture warrant. But may it not, like many other of our practices, be fairly deduced from general principles, and be as proper as though it were expressly enjoined? Does not reason and the very nature of things require it?”⁵

The following is from *The Church Member's Handbook*, by William Crowell, a Baptist pastor in Waterville, Maine, 1850.

Section 25 The Powers, Rights, and Duties of Churches

“The regal and legislative authority belong to Christ alone, whose precepts, laws, ordinances, and precedents, given in the Scriptures, every church is bound to obey; but each church possesses the executive and judicial power necessary for carrying them into effect.

It has the right to exercise watch-care and discipline over all its members, to warn the unruly, and censure, or if need be, to expel offenders. To the church belongs the power of admitting members, by judging of their qualifications.

All these powers, rights, and duties, belong to each church as a whole; and must be exercised by its members, deliberating and voting in church-meeting; the minority submitting themselves in the fear of God to the decisions of the majority, regularly expressed.”

Section 29 Deliberative Meetings

“After a subject has been calmly and maturely considered, and decided by the vote of a fair majority, the decision should be regarded as the voice of the church; yea, with tender, reverential faith, as the voice of Christ speaking through the church; and all should quietly acquiesce in the decision; yet a bare majority should never press any question, especially if important. Let a doubtful measure be delayed for more prayer.”

Section 31 Voting in Church Meetings

“All elections of church officers, and all matters of business, must be determined, after earnest prayer, by the free suffrages [votes] of the members.

Voting is done by raising the hand, or by rising, except in the choice of a pastor or deacon, when the ballot is used.”

Section 32 Receiving Members

“Every church member has a right to require satisfactory evidence of the applicant's piety, before he extends to him his fellowship,... If no objection is made, the question of reception is put to the church, and all the members...should express their fellowship by rising. Members are not voted into the church.

The decision should not be made by a majority. There should be unanimity.”⁶

J. M. Pendleton, in his work *Distinctive Principles of Baptists*, 1882, writes concerning Acts 14:23,

“The word in the original here translated ‘ordained’ literally means ‘to stretch forth the hand,’ as is the custom in Baptist churches when a vote is taken.”⁷

The following is from Edward T. Hiscox and his work *The New Directory for Baptist Churches*, 1894.

II. Modes of Admission

“There are three ways in common use, by either of which persons may be admitted to the Church, according to their religious standing and their relation to a profession of faith.

But the difference in either case has reference to the form or mode, the substantial act in all these cases being the same, viz.: a vote of the body to receive the candidate.

Each new member must be admitted by the free and voluntary consent and approval of those already members, which consent is usually expressed by a formal vote.

The following are the three modes of admission:

1. By Baptism: ...the church considers the question of reception...if satisfied, it is moved and voted that he be received as a member, on being baptized.

2. By Letter: This letter certifies to his good Christian character and regular standing, and commends him to the confidence of and membership in, the other church. If satisfied, he is received by a vote of the Church, as in the former case the letter serving as a certificate of character and standing, with permission to unite.

3. By Experience: They bring no letters, nor are they re-baptized; but give an account of their conversion and Christian life, which, being satisfactory, they are received by vote on their confession or, as it is usually stated, ‘on experience.’”

Note 5: It is a rule generally acted on, that no person shall be taken into the church to the grief of any one already a member.

Hence, members should be received not simply by a majority, but by a unanimous vote.”⁸

In conclusion, based on biblical principle and the witness of history, I submit that the act of admission in the practical day-to-day context of the local assembly is to be done through the substantial act, mechanism or procedure of a vote of the existing membership.

May the Lord continue to add to His church daily such as should be saved.



¹ Information contained in this article was taken in part from the paper entitled, *The Context of Biblical Eldership*, by Dr. Paul S. Nelson. I want to acknowledge and thank him for his permission to freely use the data in that paper without having to footnote specific passages. A copy of that paper may be obtained from the author.

² Robertson, A. T., *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Vol. III, (Baker Book House: MI), p. 116.

³ Hackett, Horatio B., *An American Commentary on the New Testament*, Acts of the Apostles (The American Publication Society: Philadelphia, PA), p. 169.

⁴ Pendleton, J. M., *Distinctive Principles of Baptists*, Reprint (The Baptist Standard Bearer: Paris, AR), pp. 197-198.

⁵ James, John Angell, *The Church Members Guide*, Reprint (Solid Ground Christian Books: Vestavia Hills, AL), 2004, p. 153.

⁶ Crowell, William, *The Church Member's Handbook* (Gould, Kendall, and Lincoln: Boston, MA), 1850, pp. 34-45.

⁷ Pendleton, J. M., *Distinctive Principles of Baptists*, Reprint (The Baptist Standard Bearer: Paris, AR), pp. 197-198.

⁸ Hiscox, Edward T., *The New Directory for Baptist Churches* (The Judson Press: Philadelphia, PA), 1894, pp. 73-77.

Baptists: *The Religion of "No"*

By J. A. Billings

It is natural for men to desire to be liked. There would be something wrong with an individual if he did not care if he were liked. This natural desire causes great consternation for professing Christians because the reality is that the world hates true biblical Christianity. Therefore the world hates Christians. There is nothing we can do to make the world like us. The world may, on occasion, respect us but they

will never like us. It is in the very nature of fallen man to hate God, to hate His Word, to hate His Son, to hate His people and to hate His assemblies. Most professing Christians do not understand this axiom.

The Desire to Present Christianity in a Good Light

Modern Christianity believes that if we would present ourselves in a better light, the world would accept us, love us and ultimately love God and His Word. We have become so obsessed with being accepted by the world that innovation has become the dominant means in our motivation to reach the world for the sake of Christ. It seems books are being written on a daily basis that show us the newest and greatest way to be liked by the world, in order that many will join us. The trend over the last twenty years has been to take the name "Baptist" off our signs, in order to make our religion less offensive. The newest approach to being accepted by the world is to take the name "Church" off our signs, in order to make us less rigid. All across America millions are flocking to Christian Centers, Community Outreaches and Bible Fellowships. Preaching has been replaced with programs and praise services; the great hymns of yesteryear have been replaced with contemporary music; coffee shops are set up with big screen televisions to make visitors comfortable; Friday night movies have replaced our prayer meetings; beach-day has replaced our evangelism; immorality in or among the membership is ignored and 8:30 am services are provided during football season. All of this so we can be "successful" and "liked."

The Consequences of Our New Measures

The reality is that the world is not stupid. The world no longer hates us for our stand for truth, now it laughs at us for our lack of seriousness and commitment to the Word of God. We have traded the world's hatred for the world's disrespect. No wonder over eighty percent of America professes to be Christians yet we have no moral influ-

ence over our society. Still, the daily drum-beat is to make Christianity even more acceptable to the masses.

God's Kingdom is Spiritual Not Carnal

The New Testament Church has nothing the world desires because the world has no spiritual appetite. The local church was instituted by God to be the earthly manifestation of the Kingdom of God. It was purchased by the shed blood of Jesus Christ (Acts 20:28) and it is populated by His redeemed people. Men and women are born into the Kingdom of God through the regenerating grace of God. The advancement of the Kingdom of God is accomplished through God's ordained means of grace in the context of the local church. It is safe to say that God has not yet failed, over the last six-thousand years, in His eternal redemptive purpose.

The Daily Life of a Believer

The life of a true, New Testament believer is summed up in attending to the means of grace provided by God, in His revealed Word, through the local church. The means God has ordained are very simple and unattractive. They are neither thrilling, inviting, exhilarating nor electrifying. The simple means are: 1. Sitting under the preaching of the Word on the Lord's Day; 2. Reading and studying the Word of God in private; 3. Private and public prayer; 4. Fellowship with the saints in the context of the local assembly; 5. Christian watch-care over one-another; 6. Submitting to the leadership of the church in their watch-care over the flock; 7. Developing a Gospel motivation in serving the unbelieving world through public acts of good works and a general life-style of benevolence and meekness.

These means of grace are not at all appealing to the carnal mind, but Baptists understand that God has ordained these very simple means for the life of the believer and the well-being of society in general.

Faithfulness Over Innovation Must Be the Battle Cry of the Hour

The general maxim of Baptists is that we understand that God requires and blesses faithfulness to his Word. More specifically, Baptists are unmovable in our conviction that the Bible is our only rule or standard for our faith and practice, i.e., what we believe and how we live. This means that our religion is a revelation from God. God has given it to us, defined it and demands conformity to it. Any deviations, whether they are omissions or additions, from the principles and practices of New Testament Christianity are not lawful. Therefore, Baptists live in a box and the boundaries of that box are found within the pages of the New Testament.

Baptists Are Seen By Modern Christianity as Unloving, Unmoveable and Harsh

The nature of the positions we take seem to be judgmental and unreasonable. By way of illustration consider the difference between a liberal and a conservative politician. The conservative works within the framework of the constitution and the rule of law. The liberal works beyond those restraints and comes up with all kinds of innovations.

For example, a liberal politician will come on TV and tell us that our schools are falling apart and we do not have enough teachers. He tells us he loves the children and we must spend an additional one trillion dollars more than we had anticipated. He then tells us not to worry because it is for the children. He goes on to condemn anyone who opposes his proposal as cold, unfeeling and full of hate. Therefore logic, good sense and reason are replaced with good motives, warm feelings and irresponsibility. Afterward, his conservative counterpart comes on TV and reminds us that the constitution limits our influence over people and the budget does not allow for the additional expenditures. He also reasons that the last monies spent were misused, and none of it went to the places it was originally intended. Then he opposes his liberal counterpart.

The conservative is immediately labeled as an unloving, harsh and unreasonable man who hates children. Of course, the liberal is seen as broad-minded, loving, kind, reasonable and generous. In short, the conservative is seen as the one who is always putting up roadblocks and saying “NO” to all the good ideas the liberal proposes. Why? Because he works within the framework of the constitution and the rule of law, while the liberal has no boundaries at all.

Baptists Have Always Been the Party of “No”

This is how liberal Christianity sees Baptists. Baptists do not go out of the way to be in opposition to others, but we are unmovable in our convictions. This is why we are judged harshly. If it is not found in the Word of God it is an innovation and must be opposed—even if the motives may be good. It started in the first century and it continues to this day. When the Judaizers tried to force circumcision on the Gentiles as a means of salvation Paul said “No!” He called their gospel “a gospel of a totally different kind.” When some tried to baptize babies in the second century the Baptists said “No!” When the Roman Caesars demanded that all Christians bow before them and forsake Christ, the Baptists said “No!” When the Popes said that salvation was only found through the Roman Catholic Church the Baptists said “No!” When the Church of England said that all preachers in England must be licensed by the State Church in order to preach, the Baptists said “No!”

In our day when the majority of modern Christianity says we must soften our approach to make us more appealing, the Baptists say “No!” When they say we must exchange programs for preaching, we say “No!” When they say we must “present practical messages and ignore doctrine, we say “No!” When they say we must have worship teams, we say “No!” The list is endless!!!

Yes, we Baptists are the party of “No.” Someone has to be the grown-up in the room. The standard has not changed and we have no right to tamper with God’s ordained means. We understand that true blessing for

Christians and the world is only found in our faithfulness to God through His revealed Word, no matter how much we desire to help God out.

Ω

A Cluster of Errors

By Dr. W. R. Downing

Matthew 7:16 Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns...?

This statement by our Lord is vital toward our understanding of doctrinal error. It is a positive declaration followed by a rhetorical question: first, the context pertains to false prophets and their doctrines—and possibly to their adherents—[the “converts” which their system produces] under the figure of a tree and its fruit. The fruit produced identifies the tree. Second, the rhetorical question anticipates a decisively negative answer with the emphatic particle μήτι. “Men do not gather from thorns a cluster of grapes, do they? Of course not!”¹ The statement is self-evident and self-explanatory to point out the reality and nature of error.

There is a cluster of errors which have their origin in several unscriptural systems which have been superimposed upon the Word of God. Modern, evangelical Christianity is entrenched with this cluster or errors, which spring from a corrupt tree. For some 1700 and more years, Christianity was relatively freed from such errors. But, beginning in the early eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a new view of sanctification, a new system of evangelism and a new system of hermeneutic arose, and with these developed some of the major doctrinal errors of our time. These errors, or heresies, as these could be called, among other things, make the Scriptures relative, degrade the gospel message, reverse the logical order of regeneration and conversion, hold conversion to be optional, separate sanctification from justification, promote a pervasive disregard for the moral self-consistency of God, deny the perpetuity of his Moral Law, teach that human nature is perfectible to a given degree, largely replace Divine right-

eousness with an unscriptural love and deny the present Lordship of Jesus Christ over believers.

What is this cluster of errors? These can be generally identified as antinomianism, the idea that Israel was “under the law,” but the Christian is under grace; an “easy-believe-ism” or religious “decisionism,” the “carnal Christian” heresy; a semi-perfectionist scheme; the Arminian notion that God loves all men without exception and either a relativism or legalism which stands as a substitute for true, biblical holiness. And from what tree did these grow? The roots reach down into the poisoned soil of Wesleyan Arminianism, the Pelagianism of Charles G. Finney and the rise of Dispensationalism. Let us note some of these more closely.

Wesleyan Arminianism

First in the historical order is Wesleyan Arminianism. John Wesley taught that one’s justification was based on his sanctification, and thus his state before God [converted or unconverted, or “falling from grace” [losing one’s salvation] depended on his sanctification.² This was true of ancient Pelagianism, Classical Arminianism and the later Pelagianism of Charles G. Finney. Today, almost every branch of Evangelical Christianity inherently teaches a semi-perfectionist scheme.³ Pentecostals and Charismatics hold that one is “saved” [takes Jesus as his Savior] and then [in a “second work of grace”] is “sanctified.” Evangelicals posit a contrast between the “carnal Christian” and the “spiritual Christian.” Wesleyan Arminianism also promoted the notion of a universal atonement, i.e., that our Lord died equally for all men without exception, but that none would be saved unless he added his ability to the work of the cross. Thus Christ died to make men saveable.

The Pelagianism of Charles G. Finney

Second, the Pelagianism of Charles G. Finney, which has given to modern evangelism its doctrine of “free will” or the power of contrary choice and the “New Measures.” These “New

Measures,” as they have been termed, initiated such evangelistic departures as “the anxious bench,” “altar call” and the general invitational system which modern, evangelical Christianity equates with “coming forward” or “walking the aisle” with being “saved.”

Dispensationalism

Third, Dispensationalism. This is an inclusive hermeneutical approach which fits agreeably with its Arminian and Pelagian forebears. It makes the Scriptures relative, denies the analogy of faith, and in reality denies their absolute character.⁴ Further, this erroneous system is inherently antinomian, as is its progeny, “New Covenant Theology.” Both hold that the Law was a legal document given to national Israel which has nothing to do with the Christian.⁵ The Lord Jesus Christ abrogated the Moral Law for believers. The believer is not “under the law,” but “under grace.”⁶ However, there is no antinomian grace, i.e., the very nature of regeneration and conversion bring one into submission to the will and moral character of God. This is noted in the larger context of the entire New Testament.⁷ Fundamentalists and others, infected with a deeply-rooted Dispensational hermeneutic, hold that one may be either a “carnal Christian” or make the transition to become a “spiritual” believer. To pass from one state to the other is by means of abdicating the throne of self and “making Jesus one’s Lord of his life” or “re-dedicating one’s life.”⁸ Such teaching, reversing the order of regeneration and conversion, in reality makes conversion optional.⁹

Pelagianism and Dispensationalism are the Antinomianism and Legalism of the Present Day.

Fourth, deriving from Wesleyan theology, Pelagianism and Dispensationalism are the antinomianism and legalism of the present day. These, though seemingly opposite, are actually inherently related. When one casts off the Moral Law of God as the standard for the Christian’s life and behavior, he necessarily becomes an antinomian. However, man as the image-bearer of

God must have order—a principle of law. The result is inevitably a legalism, i.e., a man-made system of “do’s and don’ts” as the standard of salvation, religious experience, “spirituality” and orthodoxy. Thus, antinomianism results in legalism, and it is this legalism which supplants and becomes a substitute for true biblical spirituality in Fundamentalist and Evangelical religious circles.

Thus, there is a cluster of evil fruit borne upon the tree of modern antinomian, Arminian, “easy-believeism,” religion with its “carnal Christian” heresy and optional conversion. Its roots are to be found deep in Wesleyan Arminianism with its perfectionist and semi-Pelagian teachings; Dispensationalism, with its anti-scriptural relativism and inherent antinomianism; and the revived Pelagianism of Charles G. Finney, with its confusion of regeneration and conversion and its leanings on psychology.¹⁰ Add to this the watering of modern, worldly success and the carnal desire for worldly entertainment and contemporary music—and you have modern, evangelical religion, which, while professing itself to be biblical, is actually comprised of a cluster of errors.

Ω

¹...μήτι συλλέγουσιν ἀπὸ ἀκανθῶν σταφυλάς... The context concerns false prophets, likened unto evil trees, whose nature may be known by their fruits, i.e., their converts or what their ministries produce (Matt. 7:15–20). This section is then followed by a stringent warning (Matt. 7:21–23).

²The perfectionism of Wesley may be noted in the Wesleyan hymn, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” with its references to “Let us all in Thee inherit, let us find that second rest. Take away our bent to sinning.” “Finish then Thy new creation, pure and spotless let us be.”

³This is the source of the so-called “Higher Life,” “Victorious Christian Life,” “Life on the Higher Plane,” “The Deeper Christian Life” movements, as well as the Keswick Holiness Movement and both the old-line Pentecostal and more modern Charismatic movements. These are the progeny of Wesleyan perfectionism and the Pelagian influence of Charles G. Finney’s system of religion. The relationship between these may be clearly marked

in B. B. Warfield's second volume on *Perfectionism*, the classic and most complete work on this subject [Volume VIII of *The Works of B. B. Warfield*].

⁴In its more popular form, Dispensationalism is an inclusive hermeneutic, which governs one's entire approach to Scripture; it is not merely limited to one's eschatological persuasion, [e.g., the pre-millennial return of Christ, a premillennial, "pre-Tribulation secret rapture" as the first phase of the Second Advent, which is seen as several phases, etc.]. This hermeneutic views Israel in the OT as existing in "the Dispensation of Law" and, by contrast, the Christian now lives in "the Dispensation of Grace." In spite of such songs as "Free from the Law," the believer is *not* free from God's Moral Law. Indeed, saving grace brings about a willing conformity to the Moral Law, corresponding to the "law" ontologically inscribed upon the heart at creation (Rom. 2:11-16). On the final Day of Judgment, this same Moral Law will be the final judge of all men (Rom. 3:19-20). Further, this system divorces positional sanctification from both definitive and practical sanctification, thus promoting its "carnal Christian" doctrine and denying the utter necessity of a truly converted life.

⁵The Moral Law, as distinct from the civil laws, ceremonial laws and dietary laws, did not originate at Sinai; rather it was codified and inscripturated at Sinai. Through Moses, this Moral Law was given to a redeemed and covenant people (Ex. 20:1-2) so they could reflect God's moral character in their lives—not as a legalistic system to earn merit before God. It remains the transcript of the moral self-consistency [absolute righteous character] of God. It was indelibly inscribed upon man's inner being at creation, rendering him, as the image-bearer of God, a rational, morally-responsible being. The Apostle Paul states in Rom. 3:27-31, that as there is but one God and one way of justification, faith establishes the law; faith does not abrogate it.

In the Galatian Epistle, when the Apostle Paul writes against the Law as contrasted with grace, he includes circumcision and festivals (2:3; 5:2-3, 6, 11, 15; 6:13), thus referring the to the whole Mosaic Covenant as it pertained to national Israel, not in particular to the Moral Law. He was countering the "Judaizers" who preached circumcision, i.e., taught that one must become a Jew to become a Christian (Acts. 15:1). When Paul does refer to the Moral Law in Gal. 3:24, he uses the perfect tense, "The law was and continues to be our schoolmaster to lead us to Christ [ὥστε ὁ νόμος παιδαγωγὸς ἡμῶν γέγονεν εἰς Χριστόν]." The Moral Law continues to be God-ordained means of conviction of sin. Modern Dispensational antinomianism

largely accounts for the low state of evangelical Christianity, modern "decisionism," the "carnal Christian" heresy and the notion that a converted life is optional.

⁶Rom. 10:4 τέλος γὰρ νόμου Χριστὸς εἰς δικαιοσύνην παντὶ τῷ πιστεύοντι. This self-explanatory τέλος has fulfillment as its basic significance [Liddel & Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, pp. 1772-1773]. Christ is the fulfillment of the law [through his active and passive obedience], but only as to justification and only for believers. Believers are freed from its curse and condemnation, not from its rule over the life. Law and grace are not enemies when rightly considered. Rom. 6:14 "For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law [οὐ γὰρ ἐστε ὑπὸ νόμου], but under grace." The term "law" is anarthrous, thus referring to a principle of law, i.e., an outward principle of law, not to the Moral Law.

⁷The grace of God brings one into essential conformity to the moral character of God. Cf. Rom. 8:1-4; Eph. 4:22-24. This is not a command, but a statement of fact made evident by the use of the aor. infcs. of purpose. The believer is the new man in Christ; the old man [unregenerate self] was crucified with Christ. The aor. ptcs. in Col. 3:9-10 reveal that every believer already has a regenerate mind-set. Rom. 6:14 reveal that the believer's union with Christ necessitates the breaking of the reigning power of sin and the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the life and experience, as also made perfectly clear in v. 17-18. Salvation is seen as a change of masters.

⁸The Scriptures know nothing of such a "two-stage" Christianity." The Corinthians were termed "carnal" because they looked to men for their examples and party-spirit rather than to the Lord Jesus (1 Cor. 3:1-4). Any teaching which denies the reality and the necessity of a converted life is manifestly heretical.

⁹Dr. Harold J. Ockenga has put the matter succinctly: "Some Reformed theologians... teach that regeneration by the Holy Spirit precedes conversion. The evangelical position is that regeneration is conditioned upon repentance, confession and faith." Quoted by Iain Murray, *The Invitation System*, p. 18. Modern, evangelical Christianity has thus reversed this order and thus crossed the line from salvation by grace [i.e., initiated and sustained by God in his grace, Eph. 2:8, ...τῇ γὰρ χάριτί ἐστε σεσωσμένοι διὰ πίστεως...] to salvation by works [i.e., initiated by human motivation and sustained by human ability]. Thus, repentance [which Dispensationalism either minimizes or denies] is mere moral reformation and saving faith is mere human trust.

¹⁰Finney termed psychology "the philosophy

of the human mind" See Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*. New York: Fleming H. Revell, n.d., p. 253. Many of his "converts" evidently underwent a psychological experience rather than a true, spiritual transformation. [Dr. D. M. Lloyd-Jones wrote a booklet on this subject entitled: *Conversions: Psychological or Spiritual?*]. Finney taught that conversion was a mere re-directing of the will rather than the transformation wrought by biblical regeneration, and that the sinner could make himself a "new heart" See Charles G. Finney, *Autobiography*, pp. 365-371.

Images from Church History



James Madison Pendleton
(1811 - 1891)

J. M. Pendleton was a leading 19th century Baptist preacher, educator and theologian.

"What is an evangelical denomination? A denomination whose faith and practice correspond with the gospel. What is an evangelical church? A church formed according to the New Testament model."¹¹

¹¹<http://www.spiritustemporis.com/james-madison-pendleton/quotes.html>