

REDEEMING THE TIME

"Redeeming the time, because the days are evil" (Ephesians 5:16).

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Pope Francis and the "Blessing" of Sin

BY BRAD K. GSELL

During the week before Christmas 2023, Pope Francis issued a "Declaration" entitled *"Fiducia Supplicans: On the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings."* At first sight, one might assume it was a statement seeking to define the Biblical teaching on the blessings of God.

However, it really is a convoluted defense of why it is appropriate for priests to issue blessings to same sex couples.

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PHOTO: Pope Francis presents newly appointed Victor Manuel Cardinal Fernández his biretta and cardinal's ring on September 30, 2023. Fernández, a "progressive" theologian was also made prefect of the powerful Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith.



THE CHIEF END OF MAN

BY PAUL M. ELLIOTT

This message was delivered on June 22, 2023, at the 21st World Congress of the International Council of Christian Churches, in Collingswood, NJ, USA.

I bring you greetings from Teaching The Word Ministries and The Scripture-Driven Church radio broadcast. We are in our 25th year of worldwide ministry, and I am grateful to be with you during this Congress.

I attended my first ICCC Congress 61 years ago — in Amsterdam in 1962. I was only ten years old. I traveled with my mother, and we both sang in the North American Congress choir that was conducted by Dr. Hyland Shepherd. As I look back I believe it was through that event, through that Congress, that the Lord began to plant in my heart His calling to the Gospel ministry.

Our radio broadcast is heard on a number of stations in the United States and over 30 other countries, mainly in the Caribbean, northern South America, and West Africa. Our announcer begins each broadcast with our ministry motto: "The church of Jesus Christ must be the Scripture-driven church. God's inspired, inerrant Word must be our sole authority, and our infallible critic, in every area of life and ministry."

The Bible is the only supernatural Book. It is the only Book that tells us the truth — the truth about God, the truth about the world, the truth about ourselves, and the truth about the end of this present evil world and the dawning of the world of righteousness to come. And so I invite you to

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"Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."

WESTMINSTER SHORTER CATECHISM #1



The Second Scottish Reformation

PART 4

BY MARK W. EVANS

In 1618, King James I of England forced upon the Scottish Presbyterian Church the “Five Articles of Perth,” requiring the following Roman practices: 1. Kneeling at the communion; 2. The observation of certain holidays; 3. Episcopal confirmation; 4. Private baptism; 5. Private communion.”¹ These dictates of an ecclesiastical tyrant are not warranted in the Word of God.

As believers, the Bible is our only rule of faith and practice. Scottish preachers and laymen rejected this invasion upon Christ’s Church. When the articles were officially enacted, a startling incident sealed the church’s abhorrence to the king’s religious tyranny.

Church historian J.A. Wylie wrote: “On the day on which they were to be sanctioned, a heavy cloud had hung above Edinburgh since morning; that cloud waxed ever the darker as the hour approached when the articles were to be ratified, till at last it filled the Parliament Hall with the gloom almost of night. The moment the Marquis of Hamilton, the commissioner, rose and touched the Act with the royal scepter, the cloud burst in a terrific storm right over the Parliament House. Three lurid gleams, darting in the large window, flashed their vivid fires in the commissioner’s face. Then came terrible peals of thunder, which were succeeded by torrents of rain and hail, that inundated the streets, and made it difficult for the members to reach their homes.

The day was long remembered in Scotland by the name of ‘Black Saturday.’”²

King James had intruded upon the Lord’s people and their Scriptural worship. He faced a land determined to obey God, rather than men. Wylie observed: “[T]he really Protestant people of Scotland, we say, were as inflexibly bent as ever on repudiating a form of Church government which they knew was meant to pave the way for tyranny in the State, and a ritualistic worship, which they held to be of the nature of

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idolatry; and of all his labor in the matter the king reaped nothing save disappointment, vexation, and trouble, which accompanied him till he sank into his grave in 1625.”³

Following the death of King James, revivals arose in Scotland. The preachers preached the same truths from the Scriptures, but they seemed to come alive with new zeal and the congregations were awakened with repentance and fervent resolve to serve the King of kings. The Gospel of Christ pierced the hearts of the unconverted and drew them to the bleeding Lamb of God. Even those who were thought to be hopeless were snatched out of the fire

to live a life of faith and obedience, even unto death.

The revivals spread throughout Scotland. In his book *The Story of the Scottish Church*, Thomas M’Crie wrote: “The word of God sank deep into the hearts of the hearers, forcing them to retire, like the stricken deer, into solitude, there to weep and mourn till the dart was extracted by the hand that had launched it, and the balm of consolation was poured into the bleeding wound. It was some time before the modesty of the converts would permit them to own the change brought upon them, till, like the spring of living water, which cannot be controlled or concealed, the grace of God evinced its power by bursting from the once ‘stony heart,’ and pouring itself forth in the pure, peaceful, and fruitful stream of a holy conversation. And it is worthy of remark, that then, as it has often been both before and since, the Most High was visibly preparing His Church by a copious effusion of His Holy Spirit, manifested in the general revival of religion, for the struggles which awaited her, in asserting His righteous claims against the powers of this world, and carrying into effect the noble enterprises which were before her.”⁴

The new Stuart King, Charles I, came to the throne of England in March 1625. M’Crie wrote: “He was taught to hold, as a point of religious rather than political faith, that the king, in his sole person, was superior to all law, civil or ecclesiastical.”

It was not until 1633 that he visited Scotland to receive his crown. While there, he and his retinue desecrated the Lord’s Day, giving a certain signal of his lack of true piety. The ceremonies also included rites and attire that smacked of popery. Bishop William Laud, the Archbishop of Canterbury, rebuked a bishop for not having on “a full episcopal costume.” He said, “How dare you, sir, appear in this place without your canonicals?”⁵

King Charles I soon learned of the displeasure of the Scottish people. Lord Loudoun plainly informed him, “Sire,

In our present deluge of tyranny and rebellion against God, we have the assurance of knowing that our Savior is the same yesterday, today, and forever. God's Word promises: "For he must reign, till He hath put all enemies under His feet" (1 Corinthians 15:25). Truly, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1).

the people of Scotland will obey you in everything with the utmost cheerfulness, provided you do not touch their religion and conscience."⁶

In former years, John Knox devised a way to assist inexperienced pastors in their leading of worship services. He wrote his book of liturgy, which included written prayers to accompany the reading of Psalms.

The Scottish people tolerated this method, but insisted that regular pastors not read their prayers. They detested the Prayer Book of the Church of England because Romish teaching was inserted into their prayers. They also knew that written prayers were contrary to the Scriptures and inconsistent with ancient practice. It was necessary, they believed, that regular ministers not read prayers, but exercise their liberty when offering up their supplications before the Lord.

By request from the Scottish bishops, Bishop Laud gladly authored a Service Book, including prescribed lit-

urgies and prayers. His Book of Canons asserted the King's power and supremacy over the Church, and included liturgy that was similar to Rome's breviary "and in some points, particularly the Communion Service, it borrowed the very words of the Mass Book."⁷ It was appointed that on July 23, 1618, Laud's Service Book would be publicly read in St. Giles Church, in Edinburgh.

At the appointed Sunday morning, the Dean of Edinburgh appeared dressed in his "canonicals." A vast crowd had gathered, both inside and outside. The Dean, with the "Liturgy" in his hands, made his way through the dense crowd and mounted the pulpit. When he began to speak, voices were raised around him and he heard the sound of an object passing by his ear. Janet Geddes, had picked up her large stool, threw it, and shouted, "Villain, dost thou say mass at my lug [ear]?"⁸ The Dean dispatched his surplice, believing that was the target, and fled with all haste. Edinburgh's bishop, thinking that the riotous assembly would reverence his office, entered the pulpit. However, the crowd yelled, "A Pope — a Pope — Antichrist! Pull him down!"⁹ The distressed cleric ran and managed to get into his carriage and flee to safety.

Wylie observed: "If the hatred of the Scottish people entertained of the Liturgy had found vent only in unpremeditated tumults, the king would have triumphed in the end; but along with this effervescence on the surface there was a strong and steady current flowing underneath; and the intelligent determination which pervaded all ranks shaped itself into well-considered measures. The Privy Council of Scotland, pausing before the firm attitude assumed by the nation, sent a representation to the king of the true state of feeling in Scotland. The reply of Charles was more insolent than ever: the new Liturgy must be brought into use: and another proclamation was issued to that effect, branding with treason all who opposed it. This was all that was needed thoroughly to rouse the spirit of the Scots, which had slum-

bered these thirty years, and to band them together in the most resolute resistance to a tyranny that seemed bent on the utter destruction of their liberties. Noblemen, gentlemen, and burgesses flocked from all the cities and shires of the Lowlands to Edinburgh, to concert united action."¹⁰

King Charles I soon learned of the displeasure of the Scottish people. Lord Loudoun plainly informed him, "Sire, the people of Scotland will obey you in everything with the utmost cheerfulness, provided you do not touch their religion and conscience."

For some 50 years the battle for the "Crown Rights of Jesus Christ" would rage and unfold the glory of the true Head of the Church. In our present deluge of tyranny and rebellion against God, we have the assurance of knowing that our Savior is the same yesterday, today, and forever. God's Word promises: "For he must reign, till He hath put all enemies under His feet" (1 Corinthians 15:25). Truly, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1).

¹J.A. Wylie, *The History of Protestantism* (London: Cassell and Company, n.d. [originally published, 1878], Vol. III, p. 532.

²*Ibid.*, p. 532.

³*Ibid.*, p. 533.

⁴Thomas M'Crie, *The Story of the Scottish Church* (Glasgow: Bell and Bain Ltd, n.d.), p. 134.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁷Wylie, p. 512.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 542.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰*Ibid.*

The Good News...

"But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ."

EPHESIANS 2:13



The Rev. Mark Evans is the pastor of Hope Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, and the Vice President of the American Council of Christian Churches.

POPE FRANCIS AND THE “BLESSING” OF SIN

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In typical fashion, the document is full of vague double speak, pious-sounding clichés, and contradictory statements — designed to advance an agenda, but with enough enigmatic language to provide the Pontiff cover from the expected negative fallout.

In fact, in January 2024, the Pope stated: “Sometimes decisions are not accepted, but in most cases when decisions are not accepted, **it is because they are not understood**” (emphasis ours). He further accused opponents of jumping to “ugly conclusions.”

This is typical of those who seek to subvert bedrock principles, whether in religion or politics. You first describe your detractors as too unintelligent to understand, and then accuse them of having evil motives and/or wrongly viewing something innocent and good as sinister.

This Declaration is being celebrated in the secular press and in militantly gay media. *Philadelphia Gay News* proudly announced that two officially “married” men in New York City had “made history” by being the first to receive such a blessing. They did not come in repentance, but rather in pride

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of their sin. Jesuit priest Father James Martin, a pro-LGBTQ+ activist, pronounced the Aaronic Benediction from Numbers 4:24-26 upon the men. This blasphemous use of Scripture was done “in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

This shift in church teaching is a result of many bishops and priests defying church law in refusing to discipline those who have already been issuing such blessings, and even in “liturgies” being written for such occasions. Also, the placing of manmade “diversity” and “inclusion” above the Word of God has caused the church to follow “enticing words of man’s wisdom” (1 Corinthians 2:4), rather than the clear teaching of the Scriptures.

Errors already existing in Roman Catholicism also played a major role in promoting the indefensible in this new Declaration.

Getting to the point of the matter

The Declaration states that “blessing couples in irregular situations and same-sex couples” is now a possibility in the Roman Catholic Church. This is accompanied by all kinds of language to justify doing that which the Word of God clearly forbids.

When examining this Declaration, there are two main Scriptural principles which must guide us:

1. The Bible clearly condemns homosexuality, and the only relationship condoned in Scripture is the marriage of one man and one woman, and any children which proceed from that union (Genesis 2:24, Matthew 19:4-6, Hebrews 13:4, etc.). Any other arrangement is in rebellion to the Word of God (see Leviticus 18:22-23, Romans 1:26-28, 1 Corinthians 6:9, etc.).
2. Blessings, in the sense of those offered by God, or by one of His servants in God’s name, are ALWAYS in response to obedience to the Word of God, and proceed from God. God never blesses that which is sinful. In Deuteronomy 28:1-2, God tells the children of Israel: “... if thou shalt hearken diligently unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to observe and to do all his commandments which I command thee this day, that the LORD thy God will set thee on high above all nations of the earth: And all these blessings shall come on thee, and over-

take thee, if thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God.”

Likewise, Psalm 1:1-2 tells us: “Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night.”

It is interesting to see how an abundance of cleverly devised verbiage seeks to get around these clear Scriptural principles.

Víctor Manuel Cardinal Fernández

The Associate Press described this Declaration as “a radical shift in policy,” and indeed it is!

This was confirmed by Víctor Manuel Cardinal Fernández, newly appointed Cardinal and Prefect of the Roman Catholic Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (DDF). Fernández, who has long been a ghost writer for the Pope, had the major hand in leading the Dicastery in the formulation and writing of this Declaration. Therefore, a few words about him are worth noting.

The Cardinal is a longtime associate of Pope Francis from his days in Argentina. However, within the last 15 years, Fernández was questioned by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in Rome because of serious concerns about his theology, and his “progressive” beliefs.

Elise Ann Allen, writing for *Crux Catholic Media* this past July, stated that Pope Francis had written a “highly unusual” letter in Spanish to Fernández, “which was published alongside the announcement of his appointment. It defined his mission, saying: ‘The dicastery over which you will preside in other times came to use immoral methods. Those were times when, rather than promoting theological knowledge, possible doctrinal errors were pursued. What I expect from you is certainly something very different.’”

Jonathan Liedl, writing for *The National Catholic Register*, January 8, 2024,

spotlighted a 1998 book by Fernández, entitled *Mystical Passion: Spirituality and Sensuality*. One chapter in the book contains an evil depiction of Christ having a sinful relationship with a 16-year-old girl. The description in Liedl's article is not appropriate for us to print here. One Catholic website, *Messa in Latino* described this book as "truly scandalous and apparently blasphemous."

Others of the Cardinal's books are outside the realm of what should ever come from the pen of anyone who names the name of Christ.

Why is it designated as a "Declaration"?

Fernández writes in the preface of the document concerning why it was designated as a "Declaration": "Such theological reflection, based on the pastoral vision of Pope Francis, **implies a real development** [a nice sounding word in place of 'change' or 'contradiction'] **from what has been said**" in previous church documents. The DDF wrote this document after it "consulted experts, undertook a careful drafting process, and discussed the text in the Congresso of the Doctrinal Section of the Dicastery. During that time, the document was discussed with the Holy Father. Finally, the text of the Declaration was submitted to the Holy Father for his review, and he approved it with his signature."

Scripture plus tradition plus the teaching of the Holy Father

The reason this "radical shift" is possible is that Roman Catholicism rejects *sola scriptura* — a defining principle of the Protestant Reformation that teaches that the Scriptures ALONE are our authority in all matters. Cardinal Fernández further states: "Since 'the Roman Curia is primarily an instrument at the service of the successor of Peter' ('Apostolic Constitution *Praedicate Evangelium*," II:1), our work must foster, along with an understanding of

the Church's perennial doctrine, the reception of the Holy Father's teaching." Therefore codified church doctrine and law (which contains much extrabiblical and unbiblical tradition), together with the peculiar teaching of any reigning pope, are just as important (if not more so) than Scripture. This has allowed much heresy to enter and remain within Roman Catholicism.



In addition to the sacraments, Roman Catholicism teaches that there are "sacramentals," that "imitate" the sacraments. These include Church-issued blessings, certain ceremonies, and the use of material items such as rosary beads, holy water, etc. Above pictured is a relic, a supposed arm bone of St. Anne, who Catholic tradition says was the maternal grandmother of Christ.

It is found in the Basilica of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré near Quebec City. People bow down and venerate such relics, which are said to have healing and miracles associated with them.

False dichotomy between "doctrinal"/"liturgical" and "pastoral" blessings

Great differentiation is made between official "liturgical" blessings and those issued by priests in their "pastoral" role; also, between "sacraments"

and so-called "sacramentals." This is done, so the Church can defend itself from detractors by saying it can bless same-sex unions, but NOT recognize them as marriages.

The Declaration states: "From a strictly liturgical point of view, a blessing requires that what is blessed be conformed to God's will, as expressed in the teachings of the Church." Liturgy or not, the sanction of the supposed "Church," or not, the blessing of God is only conferred on those who obey His will — as expressed in the Holy Scriptures!

However, now we are told that a blessing that does not involve the "sacrament" of marriage might be permissible after all: "... one can understand the possibility of blessing couples in irregular situations and same-sex couples without officially validating their status or changing in any way the Church's perennial teaching on marriage." We presume one can now give God's blessing to an unrepentant bank robber — as long as you do not have to pass judgment on what he has done!

The whole idea of "sacramentals" is not Biblical, because they require the intercession of the Roman Catholic Church, and many include what can only be described as superstitious, magical powers. The Second Vatican Council in 1962 declared: "These [sacramentals] are sacred signs that resemble the sacraments: they signify effects, particularly of a spiritual kind, which are obtained through the Church's intercession. By them men are disposed to receive the chief effect of the sacraments, and various occasions of life are sanctified."¹

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* specifies that "sacramentals do not confer the grace of the Holy Spirit in the way that the sacraments do, but by the Church's prayer, they prepare us to receive grace and dispose us to cooperate with it."²

In addition, "sacramentals" "have been established as a kind of imitation

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of the sacraments, blessings are signs above all of spiritual effects that are achieved through the Church’s intercession.”³

Certainly, the Bible speaks of special blessings conferred by the Lord in baptism and the Lord’s Supper, ordinances specifically instituted by God (although they do not save us in any way!), yet the Catholic teaching concerning “sacramentals” is extrabiblical and usurps to “the Church” that which belongs to God alone.

Church-granted blessings, the use of material objects such as rosary beads, and certain ceremonies are considered “sacramentals.” Recently, while in Canada, I saw inside the Basilica of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré near Quebec City. Many pilgrimages are made here each year. It is a shrine to St. Anne, supposedly the grandmother of Jesus — although this is nowhere found in the Bible. A prized arm bone of St. Anne, given to the Basilica by the Vatican, is encased within a gold arm and other artistic items. People bow before this relic. A tile in the floor nearby designates where Pope John Paul II knelt before a large statue of St. Anne positioned right in front of the relic. The praying to saints, the veneration of Mary, the bowing before such relics (often of questionable provenance), detracts from the honor and praise due to God alone — although Catholics will often deny this fact. The same can be said of Church-issued blessings.

Motherly and Fatherly Compassion of the Church is used to condone Same Sex “blessings”

Lest their changing human philosophies be exposed for what they are, the 2023 Declaration states: “this Dicastery has considered several questions of both a formal and an informal nature about the possibility of blessing same-

sex couples and — in light of Pope Francis’ fatherly and pastoral approach — of offering new clarifications on the *Responsum ad dubium* that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published on 22 February 2021.” This 2021 statement is contradicted in many regards by this present Declaration of 2023.

Earlier we were told that these stark changes are “a real development.” Now they are called “new clarifications.”

So the Pope’s supposed “fatherly and pastoral approach” is to take precedence over the clear teaching of the Scriptures. Anything that violates Scripture is neither “fatherly” nor “pastoral.”

A number of additional statements are given to bolster this reasoning. If you see the love of a father or mother for a child to be good, and if you have Christian “meekness,” then, they argue, you must be for this new Declaration.

In this change, we are to have “a vision that draws together the doctrinal aspects with the pastoral ones in a coherent manner because ‘all religious teaching ultimately has to be reflected in the teacher’s way of life, which awakens the assent of the heart by its nearness, love, and witness.’”⁴

Point 40 of the 2023 Declaration states further: “Indeed, through these blessings that are given not through the ritual forms proper to the liturgy but as an expression of the Church’s maternal heart....” So now, Catholics must lay aside Church teaching in favor of the “Church’s maternal heart.”

In Point 41, we see that regardless of stated church teaching, it appears that the subjective “fatherly discernment” of the priest reigns supreme: “What has been said in this Declaration regarding the blessings of same-sex couples is sufficient to guide the prudent and fatherly discernment of ordained ministers in this regard.”

Again, Point 44 justifies this new teaching, using the words of the previous Pope: “As Pope Benedict XVI taught, ‘Like Mary, the Church is the mediator of God’s blessing for the world: she receives it in receiving Jesus and she transmits it in bearing Jesus. He is the

mercy and the peace that the world, of itself, cannot give, and which it needs always, at least as much as bread.’”⁵

Another reason given in the Declaration for approving the blessing of same sex unions: “the root of Christian meekness” is “the ability to feel blessed and the ability to bless....”⁶

We must follow the whole counsel of God. A Biblical virtue (in this case “meekness”) can never be twisted to condone doing something evil. When Satan tempted Christ to jump from the roof of the temple, he first said: “If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone” (Matthew 4:6). Jesus did NOT comply, simply because Satan had wrested Biblical truth out of context to advance his evil purposes. Instead, in verse 7, Christ replied: “It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the LORD thy God.”

Who can confer blessings?

As we have seen, Catholicism places much power in the hands of the Church and of its priests in conferring blessings. The Declaration states that people “constantly come to seek a blessing from Mother Church.”

The Bible does not tell us that the Church confers blessings. Instead, James 1:17 tells us: “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.”

The shifting sands of man’s wisdom versus the unchanging Word of God

During a General Audience on December 2, 2020, Pope Francis stated: “...[God] does not and cannot bless sin: he blesses sinful man, so that he may recognize that he is part of his plan of love and allow himself to be changed by him. He in fact ‘takes us as we are, but never leaves us as we are.’”

However, this new Declaration does not just advocate giving a blessing to those who turn in repentance from their sin. It is giving permission to give a blessing on those coming in the very context of unconfessed sin, and who are proud of their sin.

To show the stark difference between the 2023 Declaration and previous church teaching, one need only look back two years. In 2021, the Con-

No amount of human reasoning, no amount of Church Tradition, no philosophy of a sinful, human pope must ever be heeded if in contradiction to the “Thus saith the Lord” of Holy Scripture!

gregation for the Doctrine of the Faith referenced a letter written in 1986, when Pope John Paul II was in office, which was clear that to issue a “blessing” to a homosexual couple would “approve and encourage a choice and a way of life that cannot be recognized as objectively ordered to the revealed plans of God.”⁷

The 2021 statement continues: “For this reason, it is not licit to impart a blessing on relationships, or partnerships, even stable, that involve sexual activity outside of marriage (*i.e.*, outside the indissoluble union of a man and a woman open in itself to the transmission of life), as is the case of the unions between persons of the same sex,” and it makes reference to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.⁸

What the Bible says about blessings

The Bible speaks of blessings and cursings. In Genesis, God makes a covenant with Abraham. Genesis 12:3 records the words directly from God: “And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.”

The Bible makes it perfectly plain — in many places — whom God will bless. “Blessed is every one that feareth the LORD; that walketh in his ways” (Psalm 128:1). Homosexual “couples” do not fear the Lord, nor do they walk in His ways. Therefore, they cannot receive the blessing of God until they repent and turn from their sin.

Many times blessings do come from the mouths of men, but this is always in relation to the blessing of God. Aaron the high priest prayed in Numbers 6:24-26: “The LORD bless thee, and keep thee: The LORD make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: The LORD lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.”

In Matthew 5:44, Christ commands us to “bless them that curse you.” This phrase appears in the *Textus Receptus* manuscripts, but does not appear in most modern translations, which are based on other texts.

Baptist pastor John Gill wrote concerning this passage: “Bless them that curse you: when wicked men curse you, as Shimei cursed David, do not ‘render evil for evil, or railing for railing, but contrariwise, blessing’; give good words, use kind language, mild and soft expressions; such as may either win upon them, or put them to shame and silence: ‘bless, and curse not’; the latter belongs to them, the former to you; ‘let them curse, but bless thou’: curses better fit their mouths, and blessings thine. **Blessing here, does not signify praising them, for that would be sinful**, which is sometimes the sense of the word; **nor wishing, or praying for a blessing on them**, which is right and good; but this is mentioned afterwards, as distinct from blessing; wherefore, it is better to understand it of a sweet and engaging address unto, and behaviour and conduct towards such, whose mouths are full of cursing and bitterness” (emphasis ours).

Although we cannot agree with many things advanced by 19th century New School Presbyterian theologian Albert Barnes, his commentary on Matthew 5:44 speaks to this subject. He

writes: “The word ‘bless,’ spoken of God, means to regard with favor or to confer benefits, as when God is said to bless His people.

“When we speak of our ‘blessing God,’ it means to praise Him or give thanks to Him.

“When we speak of blessing people, it ‘unites’ the two meanings, and signifies to confer favor, to thank, or to speak well of.”

Conclusion

No amount of human reasoning, no amount of Church Tradition, no philosophy of a sinful, human pope must ever be heeded if in contradiction to the “Thus saith the Lord” of Holy Scripture!

This article should make clear the importance of the motto of the Protestant Reformers: *Sola Scriptura*! The Prophet Isaiah in chapter 8, verse 20, of his book, wrote: “To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.”

The Apostle John at the very conclusion of the last book of the Bible warns what will happen to any man who “shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy.” Let us, in faith, believe and obey the Word of God. •

¹Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy Sacrosanctum Concilium*, p. 60.

²*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Second Edition, (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016), Part II, Chapter IV, Article 2: 1670, p. 417.

³*Rituale Romanum ex Decreto Sacrosancti Oecumenici Concilii Vaticani II instauratum auctoritate Ioannis Pauli pp. II promulgatum, de benedictionibus, Praenotanda Generalia*, n.10.

⁴Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013), no. 42: AAS 105 (2013), pp. 1037-1038.

⁵Benedict XVI, *Homily on the Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God*; 45th World Day of Peace, Vatican Basilica (January 1, 2012): *Insegnamenti VIII*, 1 (2012), p. 3.

⁶Pope Francis, *Catechesis on Prayer: The Blessing* (December 2, 2020).

⁷Congregation For The Doctrine Of The Faith, “Letter Homosexualitatis problema On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons,” p. 7.

⁸*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2357.2021.



OUT

with the church

IN

with “an ever-evolving spiritual collective”

BY BRAD K. GSELL

What is your religious affiliation? You might reply Baptist, Presbyterian, Catholic, Methodist, or Lutheran. You might even say Christian, Muslim, Hindu, or atheist. However, Pew Research reports that the number of people in 2024 replying “NONE” has increased to 28 percent — sharply up from even a decade ago.

The “nones” are divided between atheists, agnostics, and those describing their religious views as “nothing in particular.” Sadly, a large percentage of these were raised in what they described as “Christian” homes.

At the same time, the Public Religion Research Institute reports that those describing themselves as “Protestant” — of all stripes — have fallen to 40 percent. We reported in the Winter 2013 issue of *Redeeming the Time* when this figure dropped below 50 percent. The October 10, 2012, issue of *the Charlotte Observer* carried a large

front page headline: “Protestants not a majority in U.S., study says.”

This was considered significant news since, for much of American history, Protestantism was the overwhelmingly predominant religion. When the United States was founded in 1776, the population was about 98 percent Protestant. Of course, those claiming to be “Protestant” today are of many stripes. Biblical Christianity has not been in the majority for a very long time.

A designer “spiritual” quest

Many of these “nones” have engaged in a self-directed, freestyle “spiritual” quest apart from any organized structure, or settled beliefs. This certainly fits with the spirit of our age, as younger people shun institutions which have given structure and order to civilization for millennia.

They often see the hypocrisy and scandals that have rocked organized churches in recent years — as wickedness which was once concealed is now publicly exposed.

Being “true to oneself, and “following your heart” have replaced obedience to God’s Word. Many have been steeped in the spirit of our age that truth is relative, and that Christian teaching against sin is evil and harmful if it restrains human ambitions and inclinations.

Further, an ungodly individualism has pervaded society, as we are increasingly taught that the desires of the individual — often sinful — are the supreme end of man. This has resulted in much self-centeredness and selfishness.

The Bible teaches that each individual is responsible directly to God. He must take responsibility for his own actions. Individual freedom is a great blessing given by God, and protected by our United States Constitution.

Yet, this freedom is not a license to indulge in vice. Our founders enshrined “the blessings of liberty” in the Constitution so each man and woman could pursue his or her God-given abilities, to have religious liberty in order to be responsible to God and to worship Him according to conscience.

“Spiritual collectives”

Every human being has a soul, created by God. If it is not filled by the Holy Spirit in regenerating grace, it will be filled by that which is false and evil.

Religion News Service, December 20, 2023, carried a report by Kathryn Post entitled “Church for ‘nones’: Meet the anti-dogma spiritual collectives emerging across the U.S.”

While Sunday gatherings have some of the trappings of a traditional church, Post reports that “these collectives reject dogma, prefer questions over answers and have no intention of converting anybody to anything. Here, LGBTQ inclusion is not up for debate, people of all and no faiths are welcome and Jesus can be a savior, a radical rabbi or a metaphor, depending on your spiritual inclination.”

A case in point is the Vinings Lake Southern Baptist church plant, near Atlanta, Georgia. It began in 2006. But when Cody Deese came as pastor in

2015, he began to make radical changes. Over 500 people left the church. Post reports that Deese “struggled to reconcile his notion of a loving God with the doctrine of hell.”

Deese left Biblical orthodoxy. He recently told attendees: “We’re an ever-evolving spiritual collective.... If you’re a Christian, wonderful. If you’re post-Christian, wonderful.”

“Hurt feelings” or refusal to obey God?

New people began attending. The article reports: “It’s common for folks at Vinings Lake to have stories of religious trauma or ‘church hurt.’” There certainly are cases of trusted spiritual leaders doing evil things which can harm people in their congregations.

However, the cases described in this article appear to be largely human rebellion against Biblical teaching. Instead of honestly saying that you simply disagree with the Bible, or that you are willfully disobeying God’s Word, it is always easy to blame a church and its leaders.

One young lady, Katie Mair, “said she was spiritually abused by a leader in the organization she worked for. Believing in a God actively working for her good no longer felt possible, but Mair still longed for community. She found Vinings Lake by searching online for ‘progressive churches near me.’

“Though certainty is more elusive at Vinings Lake, she said, her spirituality has never felt more authentic.

“I was never a whole person in evangelicalism,” said Mair. “I was always having to cut off part of me, or hide it, deny it or dress it up to look a little bit better.”

The Bible tells us that the Christian life is not easy. It is not something that we can do on our own. Only a “new creature” in Christ can lead a godly Christian life — as God works within us in our sanctification.

How much different are the complaints of this lady from the psalmist David, who wrote in Psalm 119:4-12:

“Thou hast commanded us to keep thy precepts diligently. O that my ways were directed to keep thy statutes! Then shall I not be ashamed, when I have respect unto all thy commandments. I will praise thee with uprightness of heart, when I shall have learned thy righteous judgments. I will keep thy statutes: O forsake me not utterly. Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse

The Bible tells us that the Christian life is not easy. It is not something that we can do on our own. Only a “new creature” in Christ can lead a godly Christian life — as God works within us in our sanctification.

his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word. With my whole heart have I sought thee: O let me not wander from thy commandments. Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee. Blessed art thou, O Lord: teach me thy statutes.”

David enthusiastically praised the Lord and looked to Him and His Word to live a humble, godly Christian life!

We would point this lady to the words of Paul in Romans 8:13: “... if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.” We are not to “hide,” or “dress up” ourselves. The Bible says we are to “mortify” — kill — sin. In this sense, we MUST “cut off” our sin and “deny” ourselves. On the positive side, we are increasingly to display the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).

In 2 Peter 1:3-4 we are given a beautiful picture: “According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue: Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.”

“Listening to [your] gut” or obeying God

Another Vinings Lake attendee is Chelsea Carver. Also claiming hurt at her former church, she was attracted to this “spiritual collective” because it “made room for her tough questions, thanked her for listening to her gut and went out of its way to avoid drawing boundaries around who’s in and who’s out.

“Vinings Lake doesn’t tell me how to think. It gives me enough knowledge to struggle with it, and that’s what I love,” said Carver.”

Unfortunately, it is the Bible which tells us “what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man” (Westminster Shorter Catechism #3). The church does not tell men to abandon their intellectual faculties. Yet, a truly spiritual life cannot be led by “listening to [your] gut.”

Jesus tells us in John 16:13: “Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come.”

In 1 Corinthians 2:14, Paul writes: “But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

Human “experience” and “practical spirituality” are king

Other “spiritual collectives” have taken similar paths. Miami’s Heartway Spiritual Community “pastor” Danny Prada “wrestled with concepts such as biblical inerrancy and opposition to LGBTQ leadership and marriage.”

With Biblical inerrancy — or even Biblical primacy — out the window, Prada and others are free to use whatever religious books, or even secular ones, will shore up their “spiritual” thought of the day.

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OUT WITH THE CHURCH ...

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Prada worked to change this previous Southern Baptist church from its moorings. He “slowly attracted eXvangelicals [emphasis ours], people who’d experienced religious trauma, and even yogis and New Age spiritualists who found that Prada’s teachings resonated with them. In 2019, Heartway rebranded as a spiritual community.”

Prada stated: “The focus is less on beliefs and dogma, whether conservative or progressive, and more about the experience, the practical spirituality.”

“... Last weekend I was quoting the Tao Te Ching. Sometimes I quote the Bhagavad Gita. Other times I call different psychologists and philosophers that I bring into the conversation,” said Prada. “It’s an experiment, for sure.”

The Religion News Service article further quotes Tucson, Arizona, Aldea Spiritual Community pastor Jake Haber as saying: “Our motto is ‘love, period.’ ... We determine what these wisdom texts are saying through the lens of love, rather than determining what love means through the lens of a wisdom text.”

The article continues: “While Deese typically grounds his teachings in the Bible (though it’s framed as a collection of inspired writings, not a list of answers), Haber’s talks are more based on the human experience than a particular text. All three pastors incorporate traditions beyond Christianity.”

“Spiritually collective” communion

The sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s supper are often scrapped, but some include communion — in a blasphemous counterfeit to what was instituted by Christ in Scripture.

The article reports: “At Vinings Lake, Communion is simply ‘the table’: a time during services where participants are invited to ingest the bread, gluten-free wafers, juice or wine displayed on a table in the center of the room. There’s little to no preamble and

attendees can interpret the event however they wish.

“I find it really compelling that the night before Jesus was killed ... he’s like, I have to get friends together,” Deese told RNS. ‘He gets his people together, even one that is going to betray him. And he sits at a table and raises up a glass, and the text says he gives thanks. For me, that ritual is the practice of gratitude once a week.’”

No need for evangelism

With this man-driven “spirituality,” devoid of any God-given spiritual truths, virtually all of these “spiritual collectives” have abandoned any form of evangelism. After all, with no precious gospel to proclaim, there is no “good news” in anything they have to offer.

Miss Post writes that “Instead of trying to win over their former evangelical peers to their version of spirituality, these groups have ultimately let go of the concept of conversion altogether. For them, doctrine, be it theologically conservative or progressive, is never prescriptive or a prerequisite....”

Post continues: “Vinings Lake, Heartway and Aldea espouse values over doctrine, including commitments to inclusion and diversity, enacting social justice, seeking wisdom from a variety of religious and spiritual traditions, viewing Jesus as a model for spiritual living and honoring lived experience as sacred.

“How to translate these broad values to a congregational setting, though, isn’t self-evident, particularly when gatherings are populated by self-described religious mutts, with a full spectrum of opinions.”

“A way that seemeth right unto a man”

These new “eXvangelical” “spiritual collectives” are really nothing new. They have much in common with Unitarianism and Universalism, which date back centuries. However, these older religions ostensibly connect themselves

with Christianity, which these newer ones do not necessarily do. Unitarianism began with the teaching that we must follow the life of Jesus as an example, and live a life of love and compassion. Universalism teaches that no just God would condemn anyone to hell, so every human being who has ever lived will receive eternal bliss with God.

All of these groups reject the necessity to believe any religious doctrine.

Conclusion

As we have said many times in these pages, rebellious sinful man will always seek a self-directed “spirituality” until he has been saved by the regenerating power of God’s Spirit.

Proverbs 14:12 tells us: “There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death.”

However, the true child of God rejoices in 2 Timothy 3:16-17: “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.” It teaches us everything we must believe concerning God (“doctrine”) and it offers all we need to live a fruitful Christian life (“reproof,” “correction,” and “instruction in righteousness”).

The godly Christian rejoices in this, and says with the Apostle John: “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous” (1 John 5:3). We also abound in joy that we indeed have the glorious Gospel of Christ to proclaim to a sinful, dying world. •



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THE CHIEF END OF MAN

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turn with me to a portion of Scripture that focuses on our topic for this time, which is the question, “What is the chief end of man?” Let us turn in the Word of God to Psalm 107. [Our readers are encouraged to read Psalm 107 in its entirety, before continuing with this message].

The chief end of man, as we find it in this Psalm

What is the chief end of man? We find it stated for us repeatedly in this great Psalm.

Verses 8-9: “Oh that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men! For he satisfieth the longing soul, and filleth the hungry soul with goodness.”

Verses 15-16: “Oh that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men! For he hath broken the gates of brass, and cut the bars of iron in sunder.”

Verses 21-22: “Oh that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men! And let them sacrifice the sacrifices of thanksgiving, and declare his works with rejoicing.”

Verses 31-32: “Oh that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men! Let them exalt him also in the congregation of the people, and praise him in the assembly of the elders.”

The chief end of man, as we find it in church history

We also find repeated statements concerning the chief end of man in the pages of the history of the church over many centuries.

Let us go back to the year 1360. There we find **Rev. John Ball**, a man who was associated with John Wycliffe. John Ball preached the equality of all

men as sinners before God, and that was considered heresy at the time. John Ball was eventually martyred for the faith in 1381. But in about the year 1360 he wrote a catechism that is perhaps the first on record that included this question: “What ought to be the chief and continual care of every man in this life? Answer: To glorify God and seek the salvation of his soul (1 Corinthians 10:31; Acts 16:30-31; Matthew 16:26).”

**“Oh that men would praise
the LORD for his goodness,
and for his wonderful
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his works with rejoicing.”**

Psalm 107:21-22

Let us next come forward to the year 1563. In the German **Heidelberg Catechism**, the very first question asks us: “What is the chief and highest end of man? Answer: Man’s chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy Him forever.”

Let us next come forward to the year 1618. In the Dutch Reformed **Canons of Dort**, we find this statement as to the chief end of the Church: “We ... with reverent adoration ... cry out with the apostle: ‘Oh, the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways beyond tracing out! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor? Or who has first given to God, that God should repay him? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen.’”

Let us next come forward to the year 1646. In the **Westminster Shorter Catechism**, once again we find these words, in Question 1: “What is the chief end of man? Answer: Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.”

And then let us next come forward to the **London Baptist Catechism of 1689**. “Question 1: Who is the first and best of beings? Answer: God is the first and best of beings. (Isaiah 44:6; Psalm 8:1; 97:9) Question 2. What is the chief end of man? Answer: Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever (1 Corinthians 10:31; Psalm 73:25-26).”

And then let us come forward to the year 1756. **John Wesley** made a revision of the Westminster Shorter Catechism to make it align with the developing body of Methodist doctrine. But he left Question 1 unchanged: “What is the chief end of man? Answer: Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and enjoy Him forever.”

We could go on. We find similar statements in the confessions and catechisms of various Protestant bodies in the 19th century, in the 20th century, and in the 21st.

The chief end of unsaved man

These are the positive statements of the Word of God, and the positive statements of Christ’s church over the centuries. But as we consider this question, we must also consider the negative. And the negative is this: What is the chief end of unsaved man? What is the chief end — the overriding goal — of man apart from Jesus Christ?

The chief end of unsaved man is to glorify himself, and to suffer the present misery and the eternal condemnation that result from that. Let me say that again: The chief end of unsaved man — the chief end of man apart from Jesus Christ — is to glorify himself, and to suffer the present misery and the eternal condemnation that result from that self-glorification, that refusal to give God the glory.

Where do we find the proof of these things? We find it first of all in the pages of Scripture. All the way from the third chapter of Genesis to the very end of Revelation we find man apart from God seeking his own glory, and

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suffering the misery and the condemnation that result.

We find it in the fall of man into sin. How did Satan tempt Eve? “Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat [of the forbidden tree], then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods ...” (Genesis 3:4-5). This is the appeal to pride, the appeal to self-glorification, from the beginning.

We find God’s repeated condemnation of such thinking throughout Scripture. For example, the beginning of Psalm 4:2: “O ye sons of men, how long will ye turn my glory into shame? How long will ye love vanity, and seek after leasing [falsehood]?”

And even at the end of time, as plagues and judgments come upon the earth, sinful man will still refuse to glorify God. Sinful man will still choose present misery, and eternal condemnation.

Revelation chapter 16:8-9: “And the fourth angel poured out his vial upon the sun; and power was given unto him to scorch men with fire. And men were scorched with great heat, and blasphemed the name of God, which hath power over these plagues: and they repented not to give Him glory.” They remained unrepentant; they refused to give God glory.

Verse 10 continues: “And the fifth angel poured out his vial upon the seat of the beast; and his kingdom was full of darkness; and they gnawed their tongues for pain, and blasphemed the God of Heaven because of their pains and their sores, and repented not of their deeds.”

From the third chapter of Genesis all the way to the present moment, sinful man refuses to give God the glory. Sinful man wants the glory for himself. Sinful man joins with Satan in the words that Lucifer spoke when he fell into sin, recorded in Isaiah 14:13-14: “I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congrega-



tion, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High.”

In the passage before us, Psalm 107, we find four pictures of the condition of man who does not glorify God — but, we also find God’s glorious power to deliver fallen man in each case.

Mankind Wandering in the Wilderness

First, we find sinful men, who glorify themselves rather than God, pictured as men wandering in the wilderness. Verses 4-5: “They wandered in the wilderness in a solitary way; they found no city to dwell in. Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted in them.” What is sinful man doing today but wandering in a wilderness of his own making — seeking his own way out; thinking that he

can set up a new religion, a new form of government, that will bring about a utopia.

But after every one of these efforts, sinful man is worse off than he was before. No United Nations, no World Economic Forum, no Commonwealth of Nations, no social justice movement, no coalition of globalist elites, no effort to establish a world religion, none of that can bring fallen man out of the wilderness. Night is coming on. Darkness is falling on this sin-cursed world. And they still find no city to dwell in, no security, no place of safety. “Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted in them.” That is the pitiful condition of mankind in our day, refusing to give God the glory, man wanting the glory for himself.

But what of the man who realizes his pitiful state? What of the man who

is lost in the wilderness of this world, who gives up the idea of his own glory, and cries out to the Lord of Glory for deliverance? Verse 6: “Then they cried unto the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them out of their distresses. And he led them forth by the right way, that they might go to a city of habitation.”

And so, the psalmist declares once again, verse 8: “Oh that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men! For he satisfieth the longing soul, and filleth the hungry soul with goodness.”

The writer to the Hebrews declares the rescued state of mind of those who have repented of their vainglory, and give glory to the Lord (Hebrews 13:14). Hebrews 11:13-16 tells us: “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city” (Hebrews 11:13-16).

Mankind in bondage

The second picture of man not giving glory to God is found in Psalm 107, beginning at verse 11. It is a picture of mankind in bondage because he refuses to glorify God and seeks glory for himself: “Because they rebelled against the words of God, and contemned [or despised] the counsel of the most High: Therefore he brought down their heart with labour; they fell down, and there was none to help.”

Once again, what of the man who realizes his pitiful state? What of the man who acknowledges that he is in bondage to his own pride, and gives up

all notions of his own glory, and cries out to the Lord of Glory for deliverance? Verse 13: “Then they cried unto the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them out of their distresses. he brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and brake their bands in sunder.”

And, once again, in response, we have the great refrain in verse 15: “Oh that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men!” Why? “For he hath broken the gates of brass, and cut the bars of iron in sunder” (verse 16).

This is why Paul and Silas could sing praises to God in the prison house at Philippi. This is why Paul could write to Timothy and declare, I may be in

“Let the redeemed of the Lord say so.” Let these words be our testimony to the glory of God and the enjoyment of His blessings, as we witness to the unbelieving world....

Let this continue to be the unwavering testimony of this Council – “For the Word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.”

chains in prison right now, but “the Word of God is not chained!” Even in a dark prison cell, the apostle could glorify God and enjoy Him forever.

Mankind under affliction

The third picture we find in Psalm 107 is that of man afflicted because of his pride and vainglory. Verses 17-18: “Fools because of their transgression, and because of their iniquities, are afflicted. Their soul abhorreth all manner of meat; and they draw near unto the gates of death.” Life is ebbing out. The man is at death’s door. And many an unsaved man at death’s door has cursed God in his pride and rebellion. Many an unsaved man refuses to give God glory, even as death approaches, even

as whatever glory he may have had in this world is quickly slipping away.

But what of the man who abandons his pride, and calls upon the Lord of Glory? Verses 19-20: “Then they cry unto the LORD in their trouble, and He saveth them out of their distresses. He sent his word, and healed them, and delivered them from their destructions.”

So, once again, in verses 21-22, the psalmist utters the great refrain: “Oh that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men! And let them sacrifice the sacrifices of thanksgiving, and declare his works with rejoicing.”

Mankind at the mercy of the storms of life

We find the fourth and final picture of man refusing to glorify God in verses 23-27: “They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters; these see the works of the LORD, and his wonders in the deep. For he commandeth, and raiseth the stormy wind, which lifteth up the waves thereof. They mount up to the heaven, they go down again to the depths: their soul is melted because of trouble. They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wit’s end.”

Here is man at the mercy of the storms of life. Things may have started out calmly. Life may be good. Sinful man seeks his own glory. And all may go well for a time. But then, the storm comes. Sinful man is no longer mastering life. Life is mastering him. And he is sinking into the abyss. He is at his wit’s end. He has lost whatever control of life he may have thought he had. A man may choose to continue like that — even when all of his own glory means nothing and can accomplish nothing.

But, once again, what are we told of the man who abandons his pride, abandons his own glory, and calls upon the Lord of Glory? Verses 28-30: “Then they cry unto the LORD in their trouble,

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and he bringeth them out of their distresses. He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still. Then are they glad because they be quiet; so he bringeth them unto their desired haven.”

And — once again — the great refrain, in verses 31-32: “Oh that men would praise the LORD for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men! Let them exalt him also in the congregation of the people, and praise him in the assembly of the elders.”

Our high calling

Dear friends, how can we glorify God and enjoy Him forever? I believe the essence is simply this: We must remember what we were when we still sought our own glory, and what the Lord of Glory has done by His grace to redeem us from our sinful selves. It doesn't matter if you were brought up in paganism or you were brought up in the parsonage — the ground at the foot of the Cross is level ground. Every one of us was once lost in the wilderness. Every one of us was in bondage before we came to Christ. Every one of us was in affliction that we brought

upon ourselves. Every one of us was at the mercy of the storms of life. Every one of us was prideful and willful. The tiniest infant can express pride and willfulness in amazing and even shocking ways. And we only become more expert at self-glorification as we grow older.

Dear friends, what should we seek? As the hymn writer has put it,

*Not I, but Christ be honored,
loved, exalted,
Not I, but Christ be seen,
be known and heard;
Not I, but Christ in every look
and action,
Not I, but Christ in every thought
and word.
Oh, to be saved from myself,
dear Lord,
Oh, to be lost in Thee,
Oh, that it may be no more I,
But Christ that lives in me.*

I think it is accurate to say that we are living in the time of the post-evangelical church. Much of that which calls itself the “evangelical church” today has become a mission field — and not just in the United States, but around the world. I would submit to you that a major aspect of our calling today is to be missionaries to the post-evangelical church.

Some have never thought of the church as a mission field. But much of what is called the “evangelical church” has actually descended into a post-evangelical state. The gospel of self — un-Biblical preaching and worship that support and encourage self-indulgence, self-promotion, and self-satisfaction — the gospel of self has replaced the Gospel of Christ.

The post-evangelical church is tragically disconnected from the Word of God. Churches that are disconnected from the Word soon become confused about what they believe, and uncertain of the truth. In the resulting spiritual vacuum anything may rush in to take the place of the truth. I heard a conference speaker last year who right-

ly said that we have passed beyond the time when people in churches were asking, “What is the truth?” We have passed into a time when people in many churches — especially young people — are asking a different question: “Is there even such a thing as truth?” This is what happens when churches embrace the false gospel of self, and abandon the inerrant Scriptures.

In a time such as this, dear friends, let the opening verses of Psalm 107 be our testimony: “O give thanks unto the LORD, for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, whom he hath redeemed from the hand of the enemy.” Let us point men to the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Let us hold high the standard of the Captain of our salvation, and not be ashamed — for to be ashamed of our Lord is in fact to be consumed by pride.

“Let the redeemed of the Lord say so.” Let these words be our testimony to the glory of God and the enjoyment of His blessings, as we witness to the unbelieving world. Let this be our testimony to churches that have left their first love. Let this be the testimony of each of us individually. Let this be the testimony of each of our congregations. Let this continue to be the unwavering testimony of this Council — “For the Word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.”

And what, according to God's promise, will be the result? We find it at the end of Psalm 107: “The righteous shall see it, and rejoice: and all iniquity shall stop her mouth. Whoso is wise, and will observe these things, even they shall understand the lovingkindness of the LORD.” Amen. •



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REDEEMING THE TIME

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TO GO OR NOT TO GO ...

What about Allistair Begg's "grandfatherly" advice?

BY BRAD K. GSELL

The Rev. Allistair Begg is a Reformed evangelical pastor, with a popular radio broadcast, Truth for Life. His church, Parkside Church in Chagrin Falls, Ohio, has a brief, but good, doctrinal statement, upholding the inerrancy of the Scriptures, and crucial doctrines of the Christian faith.

He has created quite a controversy over a statement he made in a recent sermon concerning advice he gave to a lady that she should attend her grandson's transgender "wedding," and take a gift. He said that by doing this she would show her love, even if she did not approve of the "wedding."

"Grandfatherly" compassion?

Religion News Service (RNS) reports that "Begg said he was thinking with his 'grandfatherly hat' when he gave that advice, hoping to help that grandmother show God's love." Although they are poles apart theologically, this is very similar to one of the Pope's justifications for the recent Declaration that priests can now offer blessings to same sex couples — his "fatherly and pastoral approach."

Despite widespread criticism, Begg has refused to back away from his comments. American Family Radio dropped Truth for Life, after having aired it for more than a decade.

Likewise, Ligonier Ministries online RefNet broadcast ministry has quietly dropped the program, filling the slots with old sermons of Dr. R.C. Sproul.

Very recently it was announced that Begg is no longer speaking at the March 2024 Shepherd's Conference, a major event sponsored by John MacArthur's Grace Community Church. RNS

reporter Bob Smietana, in a January 31, 2024, article, quotes Grace to You vice president Phil Johnson as saying: "Pastor MacArthur's counsel on that issue would be completely different from the counsel Alistair Begg said he gave an inquiring grandmother.... So both agreed that it was necessary for Pastor Begg to withdraw."

The flaws in Begg's attempts to justify his position from the Bible

Sadly, Begg used a number of Biblical accounts to justify his advice — although none of them are in any way parallel to the question at hand. It is hard to believe that, as gifted and experienced a preacher and student of the Scriptures as Begg is widely thought to be, he could not see the great flaws in his arguments.

He pointed to the father taking back the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). Yet, the Bible in no way states that the father went and participated in the son's "riotous living." In fact, Luke 15:18-19 shows the son coming in repentance of his sin: "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants."

Another example given is the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. In this case, the Samaritan showed great compassion to someone who was in grave peril due to the unjust action of murderous thieves. He was not attending a sinful event in which the man was rejoicing in his sin. Jesus told this to the lawyer with whom he was speaking to teach that all Christians should have compassion on those in need. Christ commended the Samaritan for putting his love into action, and instructs us to "Go, and do thou likewise."

Begg further mentions Christ's parable in Luke 15:3-7 of the shepherd leaving the 99 to go rescue one lost sheep. But, again, Christ tells us that the shepherd went to "rescue" the sheep, not to join in a celebration of his further destruction. The whole reason for Christ's account was to make this great point: "I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth."

The compassion shown in these three accounts is Biblical and Christ-like, but involves stark differences from the advice given to this grandmother.

"A form of blessing"

Walker Wildmon, a vice president of the American Family Association said that, in their organization's attempts to reconcile with Begg, he refused to back down. Wildmon compared it to "a dad offering to drive his alcoholic child to a bar."

Writing in Catholic journal *First Things*, Grove City College professor Dr. Carl Trueman wrote: "After all, attendance so as to show 'love' or avoid giving offense is a form of blessing, just without the name." Trueman condenses the issue nicely in a way that all can understand.

Compassion and standing against sin are not mutually exclusive

It is a great fallacy to teach that you cannot stand against sin, and still have Christ-like compassion and love in your actions. This belief has become commonplace in many unlikely circles.

The gospel message is that God so loved sinners that He sent His Son Jesus Christ to die on the cross for our sin. A righteous God, from all eternity, had the greatest of love and compassion for that which was totally depraved. Yet, nowhere does the Bible show God giving any countenance, blessing, or participation in any evil actions or ceremonies of men in order to appear loving and not to "lose" them.

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Can parents and grandparents love their progeny who are living in sin?

Certainly, parents and grandparents are to love their children and grandchildren! God places an innate love in the heart of each parent for their children, quite apart from what they may or may not do or believe.

In a sermon preached on February 5, 1871, at the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, stated: “I could abundantly justify compassion for perishing men, even on the ground of natural feelings. A mother who did not, like Hagar, weep for her dying child — call her not ‘mother,’ call her ‘monster.’”

David reflects this in Psalm 103:13, when he uses simile to make a comparison: “Like as a father pitieth [has compassion for] his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him.” Most of us know mothers and fathers who long to see their child come to Christ, and depart from evil. Often they ask us to pray, with tears in their eyes.

In this world of sin, some children and grandchildren will depart greatly from the godly training they received at home. Yet, parents must still love them. But this will never mean that they should accompany them as they go to steal, seek to defraud someone, or engage in sinful activities at a nightclub, or any number of other scenarios where they are engaging in unrepentant sin. To do so would show a lack of compassion and love.

In Acts 22:20, the Apostle Paul still had sorrow for the part he played in the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:57-60). He merely stood by and kept the coats of the murderers. Paul does say that he was “consenting unto his death,” but what is to keep people from thinking that this grandmother was “consenting,” and offering her blessing by her attendance and bringing of a gift? Would

not this harm her testimony as it might legitimately appear that she did not think this sin was “any big deal”? What would she do if those in attendance were asked to state so publicly if “any man can show just cause why they may not lawfully be wedded”?

Our advice to this grandmother

Our advice to this grandmother would be to tell her grandson that she will always love him, but that her Biblical faith will not allow her to attend an event which involves what God declares to be sin. There certainly are those who condemn sin in a very unchristlike manner, yet why are those who stand up humbly for the Word of God attacked many times as being “pharisaical” — when they are merely being obedient to the Scriptures?

Smietana reports: “Begg warned his congregation about Christians who seem unwilling to show grace or forgiveness to others, telling his congregation to be wary of pastors who are eager to loudly condemn sinners.” We should never issue threats, call people unflattering names, and so forth, but we must call “sinners to repentance” — all sinners — as Christ has commanded us (see Luke 24:47). In this case, the grandson was not seeking forgiveness.

May this lady love her grandson, recognizing that “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” May she present to him the very gospel that saved her from her sin. And, may she pray every day that God would bring conviction, and that he might come in repentance for the forgiveness of sin and the saving of his soul.

Conclusion

Begg said his advice was based partly on his desire that she not “lose her grandson.” We should never underestimate God’s ability to use the witness of a godly Christian grandmother to bring this young man to Himself, and to bring about the most genuine love this family has ever seen.

May we as Christians avoid the two extremes into which many Christians fall. May we both stand for truth and have genuine compassion for lost souls.

Christ had great condemnation for the religious leaders of His day who were **self righteous, condemnatory, and without compassion.**

In Spurgeon’s sermon, referred to above, he also preached: “The Savior never for a moment tolerates the self-righteous isolation which would make you despise the prodigal, and cavil at his restoration, much less the Cainite spirit which cries, ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ No doctrine is rightly received by you if it freezes the genial current of your Christian compassion. You may know the truth of the doctrine, but you do not know the doctrine in truth if it makes you gaze on the wrath to come without emotions of pity for immortal souls.... If you have indeed received it in its power, the love of Christ will melt your spirit to compassion for those who are despising Christ, and sealing their own destruction.

“We are debtors, for what were ye if compassion had not come to your rescue? Divine compassion, all undeserved and free, has redeemed you from your vain conversation. Surely those who receive mercy should show mercy; those who owe all they have to the pity of God, should not be pitiless to their brethren.”

The other extreme which is prevalent today is believing that **“Christian love” pushes God’s commands and the truth of the Word of God to a secondary status.** Christ did tell us that “love” for God and our neighbor are the greatest commandments (Matthew 22:37-39). Yet, He continues: “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (verse 40).

Whenever love is discussed in the Bible, it is never divorced from the fact that God is both “a JUST GOD and a SAVIOUR” (Isaiah 45:21).

We hope that Rev. Begg will prayerfully reconsider his position on this matter. •