



Media Spotlight

A BIBLICAL ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR MEDIA

SPECIAL REPORT



COVENANTALISM

A NEW FACE FOR AN OLD SPIRIT

by Albert James Dager

Christians can generally recognize the overt evils of the world that tempt us to sin. Likewise we recognize those obvious philosophies that denigrate Christ and lead men into spiritual error. What is not easily discerned is a religious philosophy that contains sufficient truth to gain our confidence while leading us into bondage to the dictates of men and into spiritual error.

Religious philosophies cater to an innate desire to prove ourselves worthy to God. By their nature they nullify God's grace and place works of righteousness in its stead. So subtle is this evil that even the most staunch defenders of the biblical doctrine of salvation by grace are seduced into implementing prescribed works not only for their own lives, but for the lives of those under their authority in the Church.

This spirit of religion is the greatest obstacle to perceiving God's will and living in obedience to it. Only in the conquest of that spirit can we exercise true freedom in Christ which guarantees our salvation and allows us to serve Him unhampered by the dictates of others.

One expression of the religious spirit is an inflexible liturgy: If we do certain things in certain ways we will grow spiritually, God will answer our prayers, we will be blessed. The liturgical religious spirit also tells us we must know how to pray by some formula (usually patterned after an amplified version of the Lord's Prayer) in order to be heard by God.

Another expression of the religious spirit afflicts church leaders more than anyone else. It tells them that they must get their flocks into line in order to please God. It strives for commitments from con-

gregants that they will fully support the church's programs and vision.

It isn't that these leaders are evil. Many are trying to do the best they can to disciple those under their care. But their perception of religious duty exceeds that of Scripture. They require conformity to their programs and uniformity of expression rather than unity of the Spirit and exercising of one's freedom in Christ. They perceive it their duty to line the sheep up and drill them on their responsibilities to the leadership.

TOTAL COMMITMENT

The Christian's commitment to Christ is to be total. But one's definition of total commitment to Christ might vary from person to person. Many leaders perceive total commitment to Christ as total commitment to their church or parachurch ministry. It is seen as a willingness to forego all for the benefit of the leader's vision, even by those whose labors are voluntary. Just as many corporations require those who would move up the corporate ladder to subordinate their personal and family responsibilities to those of the corporation, many pastors require their congregants to subordinate everything to the church.

Those who cannot or will not fall into line, forsaking even their own family's needs for the pastor's vision, are considered uncooperative and often treated as second-class church citizens. They are made to feel guilty or fearful of God's judgment for their failure to perform to the standards set by their pastor.

Pastors often don't understand why their congregants aren't as committed as they are to the church. They wonder why others can't make all of the meetings or get involved in all the things pastors like to see their leaders involved in. What those who make such demands neglect to realize is that it's easy to make the church one's life

when the church is the provider of one's livelihood. It's another thing to have to work in the world every day, meet the needs of personal and family obligations, and still give a substantial amount of one's income and time to the church.

Most pastors don't have another job. The meetings *are* his job. By and large the programs are *his* programs. The church revolves around *his* schedule.

This isn't the way it should be, but for the most part this is the way it is. Consequently, the less "cooperation" leaders get, the more they feel they must implement programs to insure cooperation. In such a setting the religious spirit is in its glory.

THE OLD FACE

The shepherding-discipleship movement, which attained its greatest impetus during the 1960s and 1970s, exemplifies the manifestation of the religious spirit. In its implementation of discipleship toward a goal of developing holiness in the lives of its adherents this movement destroyed marriages, split churches, induced poverty, and ruined the faith of many.

Dissatisfied with their perception of the Church's weakness in its expression of faith, and desiring to see more power exhibited in spiritual warfare, those credited with devising the shepherding-discipleship movement (Bob Mumford, Derik Prince, Don Basham, Charles Simpson and Ern Baxter) felt that the problem lay in lack of accountability to godly authority. Perceiving themselves called by God, these men implemented a discipling program with themselves as its head, and to whom others should submit in order to mature in the faith.

Working through supposedly autonomous cell groups, the shepherding-discipleship movement gained tremendous impetus among many who were justifiably dissatisfied with the impotence of their churches. People who had felt their hands tied by inactivity and dead formalism welcomed the opportunity to make themselves accountable to someone they felt they could trust to lead them along the path of a dynamic faith walk.

Unfortunately, the leaders of the movement proved to be as immature in their understanding of God's methods as those they were attempting to lead. They went beyond the parameters established by Scripture and took upon themselves the responsibility to govern virtually every aspect of the lives of those they disciplined.

