



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.

No one could make a move without the approval of their shepherd. Everyday decisions involving shopping for personal needs, what to wear, and with whom to associate came under the scrutiny of the shepherd. What had started as an attempt to build maturity in individual Christians' lives became the means to stifle mature growth and subordinate people to the whim of self-appointed prophets. The leaders of the movement failed to realize (or chose not to consider) that those they led were not their disciples, but were Jesus' disciples.

The broken lives and resulting scandals that rocked the movement eventually caused those who initiated it to back off for awhile. But although the movement died in name, the spirit behind it lives on, and many of those who initiated the original shepherding-discipleship movement are today working to implement their ideas among established churches.

THE NEW FACE

In the past the religious spirit of shepherding-discipleship was confined primarily to small cell groups which operated under extreme authoritarianism working autonomously from the established churches. Today it has gained ascendancy within the denominations and among many independent churches, both charismatic and fundamentalist. Within this new context shepherding-discipleship is called covenantalism. Its focus is, as before, on small home groups, but this time under the sponsorship of churches. Thus it has gained a respectability and acquired the confidence of pastors that it lacked in its previous life. In fact, covenantalism is increasing at a rapid pace among thousands of churches in the United States, and is spreading to many churches abroad.

Underlying the philosophy of covenantalism is a dominionist mindset which perceives the Church's mission as one of conquest over the nations. It is believed by those at the forefront of the covenant movement that the Great Commission is a mandate for the Church to take dominion over the governments of the world. This cannot be done unless a sufficient number of Christians submit to apostolic authority.

This apostolic authority is vested in certain apostles and prophets designated by a group of men and women whose religious philosophy grew out of the Latter Rain Movement of the 40s and 50s, particularly the Manifested Sons of God. This was the foundation of the shepherding-discipleship

movement of the 60s and 70s. The 80s saw these movements take root among the established churches.

It is significant that Charles Simpson, one of the leaders of the old shepherding-discipleship movement, is the founder and Chairman of The Fellowship of Covenant Ministers and Churches (FCMC), headquartered in Orlando, Florida. One of FCMC's purposes is to promote covenantalism with the goal of establishing pastors as the disciples of a dominionist agenda.

Ern Baxter, Simpson's associate in the shepherding-discipleship movement, is an Advisor to FCMC. In its first two years FCMC granted membership to some 120 churches as well as many independent ministries, and is growing steadily.

According to the thinking of those at the forefront of covenantalism, dominion cannot be achieved without worldwide evangelism which, in turn, is dependent upon a sufficient number of Christians being groomed to "take their communities and nations by force." This does not mean preaching the Gospel, although that is a part of the program. Rather, it means taking control of the spiritual and temporal forces that govern the world system. It is by nature ecumenical and concerned more with establishing a society based on biblical ethics than on true righteousness in Christ.

What seems to appeal the most to pastors is the idea that covenantalism implemented through home cell groups can result in growth for their ministry. Recognizing that the pulpit ministry is insufficient to build membership and to meet the needs of the people, they have come to realize that close-knit home fellowships can be used to their benefit.

The idea of home fellowships which form the nucleus of a congregation is in itself not wrong. In fact, it's a step in the right direction. Where those who promote covenantalism are in error is in requiring that those involved in the home fellowships meet certain standards that are not delineated in Scripture, but are outgrowths of the religious spirit of the shepherding-discipleship philosophy.

Those who would take the role of shepherd in these home cell groups must first demonstrate their loyalty to the pastor's vision for his church and a willingness to move those he disciplines in the direction the pastor deems appropriate. In essence, the home fellowships are for the benefit of the congregation only to the de-

gree that they benefit the pastor's programs. If any spiritual benefit is realized by an individual it is certainly acceptable and even touted as a reason for others to join. But if the leadership is not also benefitted the home fellowships are often dismantled or imbued with an even stricter authoritarian structure.

Proper application of God's grace nurtures an individual's freedom in Christ. The demands of leadership should be confined to those prescribed by Scripture, and should concern themselves with sin and exhortation to service toward one another. However, Church authority should be ready to implement discipline where discipline is needed, not for the sake of their own egos or to implement their programs, but with a humble caring for the spiritual benefit of those under their care. There should be no demands for performance according to the standards of men, regardless of how good they seem.

CHURCH COVENANTS

The method of implementing the new shepherding-discipleship program in the churches is to require members to sign covenants with the pastor wherein they agree to perform certain duties in order to be considered in good standing. Among other duties, these include:

- 1) commitment to a small group headed by one who has previously covenanted with the pastor to follow his "vision";
- 2) commitment to hold one another accountable for their personal lives;
- 3) commitment to tithe to the church;
- 4) commitment to a minimum standard and time of prayer;
- 5) commitment to consistent and faithful attendance at services and meetings.

No one can disagree that these are noble goals. But covenantalism by its very nature induces compulsion upon those who fall victim to it. Once a covenant is signed it is difficult to break without terrible feelings of guilt and shame at having failed not God but men to whom the allegiance was given.

It is not difficult to see that at the heart of these covenants is a shepherding mindset that gives leaders a psychological edge in herding the sheep into line with their "visions."

The Coalition on Revival (COR), headquartered in Mountain View, California, is one organization actively working to implement covenantalism in the churches. Through the influence of shepherding proponents on the Steering Committee of

COR—covenantalism has taken root. This is evidenced in the COR Covenant as well as many of its sphere documents (see “COALITION ON REVIVAL: Putting Feet On The Dominionists’ Agenda,” *Media Spotlight*, Vol. 10 - No. 1).

In its sphere document, “The Christian World View of Pastoral Renewal,” COR addresses the concept of the pastors vision:

We affirm that every pastor, to accomplish his task and stay encouraged, needs to surround himself with a few trustworthy and loyal men from among his church’s leaders who are in the process of catching his vision for their church and are eager to play their part in it and to be disciplined by him in how to be Christ-centered, Bible-obeying men of God.¹

Local pastors and seminary administrators must be made aware of the pastor’s need to create around himself a loyal, faithful band of elders and staff who are committed to his vision for their church and to helping that vision be accomplished, and who are being disciplined by that pastor.²

There is no scriptural precedent for a pastor to “surround himself with a few trustworthy and loyal men” to catch his “vision.” This is priestcraft. “Visions” for pastors invariably mean programs for growth. The more people one can get to sit in his pews and listen to him the more success he feels he has attained. And if church covenants can be used to garner loyalty to his programs so much the better. This evil has taken root because pastors have not examined their own motives in implementing their particular “vision.”

The head of the Church is Christ, not the pastor. Yet the approach of COR and that of covenantalism in general assumes that every pastor’s vision is from God and that most if not all pastors are *de facto* qualified to disciple others.

One of the paramount visions promoted among pastors by COR and other leaders of covenantalism is the taking of dominion over their communities and nations. This involves social action based upon the philosophical underpinnings of the religious right, and may include anything from protesting abortion and pornography to support of the free enterprise system and a strong military. In many cases, one who holds a liberal viewpoint on economics, the military, or other non-scripturally mandated agenda, would not be in submission to his pastor and, therefore, he would be considered not in submission to Christ.

The answer to spiritual growth does not lie in tying Christians to their pastor’s vision. It lies in an example of humility (the same example Jesus gave us) demonstrated by church leadership. If all our churches were led by God-ordained elders in mutual submission to one another, and to whom the pastors were in submission, there would be fewer splits. There would be less idolization of men who speak great, swelling words that sway congregations to support their “visions.” And there would be many who would seek to emulate Christ as they see their leaders emulate Him.

COMPULSION

The requirement to submit to a pastor’s vision induces compulsion and robs us of the experience of learning to submit to Christ in a spirit of humility. One element that induces compulsion is the requirement to tithe. Yet Jesus did not require tithing in order to be considered in good standing.

We owe not a tithe, but all we have. But unless we give without compulsion and with a cheerful attitude, the amount we give—whether 1% or 100%—is immaterial. In God’s economy giving is for the benefit of the giver, not the recipient. He is the provider for all our needs; all legitimate needs in the Body of Christ will be met by the Lord working on the hearts of those He has chosen to use for His glory. For it is He who must receive glory from our works, not we or those whom we serve.

As one grows in his faith he comes to understand by the prompting of the Holy Spirit that his giving should be generous—even sacrificial. If he is disobedient to the Spirit’s prompting in a given situation it is up to God, not the Church, to chasten him. And it is up to God, not the Church to place upon his heart how much he should give.

The Lord may at times prompt us to give directly to that widow in need rather than to the coffers of the church. (I can hear some leaders gasping). Yet if the churches took seriously their obligation to meet the needs of widows and other faithful brethren, it would not be necessary for believers to circumvent the offering plate in order to see that those needs are met.

If, in the opinion of some, this is erroneous thinking, then let the Lord convict the hearts of those who give in this manner. Teaching on giving is valid, but it is not up to those who are supported by the brethren to insist that the brethren give any particular amount. If they demand faith on the part of their congregants to receive what

they need, then they must exercise that faith themselves in believing that God will provide for all the needs of their ministry regardless of how much is given to others.

Requiring congregants to sign a covenant promising that they will tithe puts them under compulsion, particularly if they feel their tithe isn’t being properly used. This is true not only of one’s money, but of his time and talents.

While it may legitimately be said that how one handles his money reflects the depth of his commitment to Christ, it is up to no man to judge someone on the basis of how much he gives. In fact, pastors should encourage congregants to give secretly so no one can judge them in the matter but the Father who sees in secret (Matthew 6:2-4).

As much as possible, this same principle should apply to all our service. Signing covenants does not allow for privacy of one’s benevolence, but makes an open show of it. The act in itself promotes a sense of pride in those who sign it, and leadership’s disillusionment with those who do not sign it. The danger of ostracism and divisiveness among the brethren is greatly increased when they are separated into the classes of those who do and those who do not sign a covenant.

Should one not sign the covenant he is often looked upon as unsuited for ministry or for receiving the full benefits of the church’s services. Those who do not agree to attend a minimum number of services or other church functions are discouraged from being involved at all.

This approach disdains the personal freedom and the individual needs of the members. It says that their commitment to Christ isn’t sufficient to allow them good standing in the congregation; they must make a commitment to the pastors (defined as a commitment to each other).

THE TAKING OF OATHS

Once a person takes an oath (and that is what a covenant is) he is bound before God to fulfill that oath. The guilt and fear that come from failure to perform can haunt people for the rest of their lives.

Pastors who require the brethren to sign covenants in order to be considered in good standing are acting contrary to Christ’s admonition against the taking of oaths, which He stated in Matthew 5:33-37:

Again, ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old time, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt perform unto the Lord thine oaths:

But I say unto you, Swear not at all; neither by heaven; for it is God's throne:

Nor by the earth; for it is his footstool: neither by Jerusalem; for it is the city of the great King.

Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black.

But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.

It is argued that these covenants are merely reaffirmations of what we already promised God when we came to Christ. This is not true. A reaffirmation of faith does not require oaths to tithe or become involved in social action.

To be a member of the Body of Christ does not require oaths or signed covenants with men. Why, then, should Christians be required to sign them in order to receive the full benefits of the ministry or to be considered worthy of leadership?

Every time you sign a paper to pledge some given amount to a ministry or state your intention to do or pay anything beyond what is scriptural, you have taken an oath. Yet you do not know if tomorrow you will be able to fulfill that oath.

Can a minister really have at heart the interests of those he supposedly serves if he does not warn them of the danger of entering into a covenant, let alone requiring them to do so? Is he really interested in their spiritual growth if he hides from them the danger of commitment to men, all of whom are at best untrustworthy?

Those who are new in the faith may be threatened by the spectre of the extreme authoritarianism characteristic of covenantalism. And how difficult it would be to witness to unbelievers if, in addition to the scriptural requirements they may expect to adhere to upon giving their lives to Christ, we saddled them with the obligation to tithe and support the vision of a pastor they don't even know.

The way Jesus ordained for us to enter into His covenant is by baptism. And we need be baptized only once.

A MATTER OF TRUST?

Those who require their followers to sign covenants often ask them to trust that they have their best interests at heart. Yet trust is a two-way street. If someone has confessed Christ and kept his testimony pure, the leadership should trust him without requiring him to sign a covenant.

As for a pastor, we should trust him as long as he does not betray that trust. But we

should not be so foolish as to risk our birthright at his hands. Short-term commitments to his enterprises may be acceptable, but long-term commitments apart from those ordained by God's Word, such as marriage, are foolish.

We cannot equate commitment to a pastor with commitment to Jesus. If we are truly committed to Christ we will be committed to all our brethren in Christ including our pastors and elders, but we must be ever cognizant of the fact that men may fail us no matter how godly they seem. In fact, it may not be their fault that they fail us. If we put unreasonable demands on pastors and elders we can be sure that they will fail us. But that would be our fault, not theirs.

There are many pastors who are doing their best to minister God's truth out of a heart of love for those they serve. Let's not assume that all or even a majority of pastors are self-serving. In many cases where pastors appear self-serving it's because they learned their job profile from seminaries and Bible colleges that propagate a religious establishment.

If we choose to fellowship under a particular leadership we must do all we can to support that leadership in its goals to serve the brethren. Let us offer help to them rather than tear them down because we disagree with some methodology that is not addressed in Scripture. We can learn to work within any form not in conflict with Scripture in order to accomplish God's purposes for us in the Body of Christ.

Therefore, we must be diligent in our service to the Church. And the leadership should be supported to the fullest extent of our abilities. But each individual must be the judge of that extent. Covenants not expressly sanctioned in Scripture are not of God, but are born out of a religious spirit that seeks to rob God's people of their liberty in Christ.

If you are a pastor who is struggling in these areas I pray you will seek the Lord's correction in order that your congregation may be blessed and your personal ministry strengthened.

CONCLUSION

Although we are expected to judge the teachings and the actions of all within the Church, including those who lead us, we must be careful to grant to them their own freedom in Christ to serve Him the best they know how. Our attitude must be one of humility and kindness predicated upon

love for those under whose authority we have placed ourselves.

Yet the fact remains that there are evil men in the Church, some in positions of leadership. Should we find ourselves at odds with a pastor who has proven himself a deceiver, confrontation may be inevitable. If, in spite of our pleas and prayers he persists in abusing his position, God has already pronounced His judgment:

Thus saith the Lord God unto the shepherds; Woe be to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! should not the shepherds feed the flocks?

Ye eat the fat, and ye clothe you with the wool, ye kill them that are fed: but ye feed not the flock....

Therefore, ye shepherds, hear the word of the Lord;

As I live, saith the Lord God, surely because my flock became a prey, and my flock became meat to every beast of the field, because there was no shepherd, neither did my shepherds search for my flock, but the shepherds fed themselves, and fed not my flock;

Therefore, O ye shepherds, hear the word of the Lord;

Thus saith the Lord God; Behold, I am against the shepherds; and I will require my flock at their hand, and cause them to cease from feeding the flock; neither shall the shepherds feed themselves any more; for I will deliver my flock from their mouth, that they may not be meat for them. (Ezekiel 34:2-10)

How aptly this Scripture applies to those who would require covenants in order to bring the sheep into line with their "vision."

In their desire to keep the sheep from straying they herd them into pens rather than allow them to enjoy the wide pastures of God's grace and freedom in Christ. If they would tend the sheep within the boundaries of the pasture and correct them when they stray from those boundaries rather than herd them into pens to feed on the grist from their own theological biases and preconceived notions of what constitutes "Christian duty," they would prove themselves pastors worthy of the Lord's favor.

NOTES

1. Article 15a.
2. Specific Actions, Article 6.



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