

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER
717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500
Website: www.churchredeemeraz.org

Series: Special Message
Text: Hebrews 10:26-31
Date: April 13, 2008(am)

Pastor/Teacher
Gary L. W. Johnson

AN INEVITABLE CERTAINTY

The wide-spread influence of what goes by the name *Postmodern Evangelicalism* has reached into the very heart of what once was considered the Mecca of Evangelicalism, Francis Schaeffer's L'Abri. The April 5 issue of Christianity Today carried an article entitled – "Not Your Father's L'Abri." We learned that Francis Schaeffer's writings are now considered obsolete and passé – no one there reads him anymore – instead those interviewed proudly declare that they are *Postmodern* and *Emergent* – with all the tell-tale signs that this is the case. Inerrancy, a doctrine that in many ways defined Francis Schaeffer is categorically rejected along practically everything else Schaeffer stood for. We read, "Though they sometimes come seeking debate, students and workers today have no use for Schaeffer's presuppositionalist apologetics, which he adapted from the teachings of his professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, Cornelius Van Til. Van Til's aim 'was to show the non-Christian that his worldview in toto and in all its parts must logically lead back to full irrationalism, and then to show him that the Christian system provides the universal which gives a valid explanation of the universe.'" (p. 4) The apologetic approach of Van Til and Schaeffer is labeled "quite arrogant." So what approach do they think has merit? Turns out the new L'Abri has embraced the Postmodern uncertainty of Emergent guru Brian McLaren. I have made previous references to Brian McLaren in my series on the Present Evangelical Crisis. Brian McLaren's book, A Generous Orthodoxy (Zondervan, 2004) is an attempt to convince the unwitting that the older evangelicalism (as Schaeffer et. al.) was *ungenerous*. He refers to this kind of Evangelicalism with a capital "E" – he is most certainly not this kind of "Evangelical." While he on the other hand claims he is an "evangelical" (lower case "e") in the broadest sense possible—not because of some doctrinal identity, but because he is *passionate* about what he believes (well, so are Mormons and Jehovah Witnesses, but that does not make them "evangelical"). It is no wonder that D. A. Carson concludes, "I have to say, as kindly, but as forcefully as I can, that to my mind, if words mean anything, both McLaren and Chalke have largely abandoned the gospel."¹ Carson also points out that, "For almost everyone within the movement, this works out in an emphasis on feelings and affections over against linear thought and rationality; on experience over against truth; on inclusion over against exclusion; on participation over against individualism and the heroic loner. For some, this means a move from the absolute to the authentic. It means taking into account contemporary emphases on tolerance; it means not telling others they are wrong." Although the Emergent Church folk like to consider themselves culturally sophisticated, and theologically on the cutting edge of all things new and up to date—they are just as culturally conditioned as they claim their evangelical forebears were! In the case of the Emergent Evangelicals they want desperately to be perceived as "relevant" to our postmodern society. I cannot help but notice that whenever evangelicals become consumed with being culturally relevant they almost always end up adopting a very pragmatic approach in the process, with historic evangelical theology being the first thing that gets compromised. Os Guinness, himself a Schaeffer disciple who spent over three years at L'Abri, a very perceptive observer of evangelicalism wrote, "Christians are always more culturally short-sighted than they realize. They are often unable to tell, for instance, where their Christian principles leave off and their cultural perspectives begin. What many of them fail to ask themselves is 'where are we coming from and what is our own context.'"² If we accept the authority of the Bible—we are forced to deal with the Bible's teaching about the subject of Judgment (and doctrines like *wrath* and *eternal punishment*, i.e. *Hell*). We are NOT free to 'pick and choose.' For instance, we have the declarative statement of Christ in Matt:13:42; Matt. 25:41, 46 – Mark 9:43, 44. The writer to the Hebrews is likewise concerned with this sobering and solemn subject – in this passage He is drawing a parallel by means of illustration of "the lesser compared with the greater (Moses and Christ) and the consequences of apostasy. What is this? Who are *Apostates*?"

NOTE THE PARTICULARS OF V. 31

- I. A description of God is given: The living God (used earlier in 3:12)
- II. The event of their sin: They "fall into His hands."

III. **The Nature of this:** “it is a fearful thing.”

OBSERVATIONS

That God is the living God and falling into His hands implies at least Three (3) things:

OBSERVATION #1. Having to do with God Immediately – a twofold respect

- A. Without Christ to mediate
- B. Without an instrument to convey God’s Wrath

OBSERVATION #2. Having to do with God necessarily and unavoidably, He cannot be eluded or his from – Rev. 6:16. There is no escape – Heb. 2:3.

OBSERVATION #3. Having to do with God everlastingly – Luke 12:4.

CONCLUSION: You have an appointment with God – which you will keep (9:27) – outside of Christ you will meet with a God who is pictured as a “consuming fire” (12:29) – IT IS THIS DOCTRINE THAT MOTIVATED the Apostle Paul, II Cor. 5:11 – II Tim. 4:1. For Brian McLaren and his followers in the Emergent church, this is of little consequence. It was the noted Harvard philosopher of a past generation, George Santayana who coined the epigram, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” What we are witnessing today does have recent historical precedent. Two examples over the last 100 years or so quickly come to mind. J. Gresham Machen, one of the founders of my alma mater, Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, waged an on-going battle within the Presbyterian Church in the first three decades of the 20th century against the encroaching theological liberalism of the time. He was outspoken and articulate in his defense of Christian Orthodoxy. One of his better-known works carried the title Christianity and Liberalism. The liberals of his day (like many self-professed evangelicals of the present) used Orthodox and Biblical language, but impregnated these words with new meaning (terms like God, Christ, Salvation, Atonement, and the Bible). The end result was that *another gospel* and *another Jesus* was introduced into the Churches. In 1923, Machen was asked to fill the empty pulpit of the First Presbyterian Church, Princeton, as the congregation looked for a new pastor. This church was the oldest Presbyterian body in town and the choice of many professors and local elites. So Machen accepted the church’s invitation “with great trepidation.” Still, First Church’s genteel surroundings did not inhibit him on December 30, when he began a series of messages on “The Present Issue in the Church,” which proved to be particularly controversial. In it he accused Protestant liberals of dishonesty, that they were using Christian language to deny the gospel. “The plain fact is,” Machen concluded, “disguised though it may be by the use of traditional language, these two mutually exclusive religions are contending for the control of the church today.” The only legitimate solution was a division between the parties. Not surprisingly, some of First Church’s members did not agree. Chief among them was the outspoken liberal, Henry Van Dyke,³ former Presbyterian minister in Brooklyn, professor of English literature at Princeton University, especially objected to Machen’s billingsgate. Despite personal ties to the preacher (their families were distantly related), Van Dyke informed First Church’s elders, that he was giving up his pew as long as Machen occupied the pulpit. Machen had “spoiled” too many Sundays, Van Dyke complained, with “bitter, schismatic and unscriptural preaching.” In the statement, which he also released to the press and which was reported throughout the country, Van Dyke added that the few Sabbaths he was free to spend at home were too precious to be wasted listening to “such a dismal, bilious travesty of the gospel.” “We want to hear about Christ, not about Fundamentalists and Modernists.”⁴ Of course the Christ that Van Dyke embraced was not the Christ of Biblical orthodoxy.

Before Machen, another stalwart of the faith, the great preacher of the late 19th century, Charles H. Spurgeon expressed alarm over the state of evangelicalism in his day (It should be pointed out that the issues that alarmed Spurgeon eventually reached fruition two decades later in Machen’s lifetime). In what came to be known as the “Down-grade Controversy,” Spurgeon issued this grave warning, “Our solemn conviction is that things are much worse in many churches than they seem to be, and are rapidly tending downward. Read those newspapers, which represent the Broad School of Dissent, and ask yourself - How much farther could they go? What doctrine remains to be abandoned? What other truth to be the object of contempt? A new religion has been initiated, which is not more Christianity than chalk is cheese; and this religion, being destitute of moral honesty, palms itself off as the old faith with slight improvement, and on this plea usurps pulpits which were erected for gospel preaching.”⁵ Warfield, always the conscientious Calvinist, was of the opinion that confessional Calvinism was Christianity in its purest form. He declared in his critical review of the acclaimed Methodist theologian John Miley and his Arminian theology, “It is just as well that the world should come to know with utmost clearness that these Evangelical doctrines are unconformable with Arminianism. It is just as well that the world should realize with increased clearness that Evangelicalism stands or falls with Calvinism, and that every proof of Evangelicalism is a proof of Calvinism.”⁶

As Evangelicals move further and further away from their Reformational roots they move further and further away from Evangelicalism.⁷ The question is: What kind of Evangelicalism will we bequeath to the next generation? We have a responsibility, as Paul admonished Timothy to hand down the faith to the next generation. If we do not preserve that faith, we fail those that follow. We simply cannot ignore our responsibility to the larger Evangelical church. We cannot simply be *only* concerned with what happens at the local church level (as important as that is). To be preoccupied with our own little circle and our own spiritual needs is in the final analysis, an example of the retreatist pietism, and historically whenever this happens heresy eventually seeps in and renders that group heterodoxical. So, where *is* Evangelicalism going? Away from the Reformation at breakneck speed. The sad thing is, very few seem to care.

ENDNOTES:

¹ D. A. Carson, Becoming Conversant with The Emerging Church (Zondervan, 2005), p. 29.

² O. Guinness, The Grave Digger File (Hoder & Stoughton, 1983), p. 42.

³ Van Dyke's theology can best be described as—liberal with a strong dose of pietism. A leader in the movement for creedal revision, he particularly opposed a number of traditional orthodox doctrines i.e., reprobation, inerrancy, the Virgin birth of Christ, the bodily resurrection of Christ, as well as penal substitutionary atonement and was a convinced evolutionist. A staunch defender of Charles A. Briggs in the famous heresy trial, Van Dyke found little of value in the issues raised by Evangelicals like Machen. Nevertheless, he retained much of the language of Evangelical piety, though his works should be considered doctrinally very imprecise and dangerous. He is perhaps best known for his hymn, "Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee." The words to this well-known hymn celebrate the social gospel and the liberal mantra "The Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of mankind."

⁴ Cf. D. G. Hart, Defending The Faith: J. Gresham Machen and The Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America (Baker, 1994), p. 60.

⁵ C. H. Spurgeon, "Another Word Concerning the Down-Grade" in The Sword and The Trowel (Aug. 1887), p. 300.

⁶ Warfield, op. cit., p. 316.

⁷ In his own day, Spurgeon was highly criticized by his contemporaries for his Calvinistic "narrow" doctrines, which distinguished him from many of his fellow "Evangelicals" in the Baptist Union. He was out of step with everyone else, men said, because John Calvin's ghost "rode him like a nightmare." According to The Birmingham Daily Post, the key to Spurgeon's resignation from the Baptist Union was that he was "a convinced and vehement Calvinist." The Sunday School Chronicle blamed Spurgeon for "making the precise lines of his own theology the standard by which he measures fidelity to the Gospel." "He is a Calvinist," continued the same paper, "but it is not fair to judge of a man's attachment to the teaching of Christ and His Apostles by the standard of even so revered an authority as the Assembly's Catechism." A minister wrote in The Congregational Review: "What has been given up is not faith, but mainly Calvinism ... A former generation as Calvinistic to the backbone. Indeed, there were not wanting, those who treated Calvinism as the essential creed of Congregationalists. This is so no longer ... as it seems to me not the younger men only, but the bulk of Congregational ministers, have moved far from that Calvinistic standpoint which Mr. Spurgeon still courageously holds." The Methodist Times thought the same: "It can no longer be concealed that Mr. Spurgeon is out of touch with the new democracy and the younger generation of devout Evangelicals. He is standing still, but the Church of God moves on ... old fashioned Puritan formulae are driving him into a reactionary and vanquished camp." Others used less moderate language. A non-Christian writing in The National Reformer asserted, "If any such terrible being as Mr. Spurgeon's God existed, I would not worship him." Similarly statements came from those within the Church. A Baptist minister in Leicester wrote in The Christian World, September 22, 1887; "I hope I love the Holy Book, but I do not read it as Mr. Spurgeon reads it. The God of Mr. Spurgeon's theology is not my God." In the same issue of this paper, J. P. Williams, a Yorkshire Congregational minister wrote, "I fully endorse the late Henry W. Beecher's view that the old Calvinistic form of stating Christian truth is at the root of a great deal of the skepticism of the age. Rather, then, than fear, I hail with delight the desire that prevails in the pulpit and pew of today for a restatement of Christian truth." A Glasgow periodical, The Theological Reformer, carried an article in October 1887, entitled "Calvinism and Mr. Spurgeon." The writer approved of Charles G. Finney (who was an outright Pelagian) and protested: "Calvinism, however, is infinitely removed from this Evangelical conception of things. *John Calvin (Mr. Spurgeon's infallible Pope) never was converted*, but all his life was an ungodly man ..." as cited in Iain Murray, The Forgotten Spurgeon (Banner of Truth, 1973), p. 178. Both Machen and Spurgeon were vilified in their own communions. Machen was stripped of his ordination in the Presbyterian Church and not given due process in the church courts, which the liberals controlled. Spurgeon was publicly censured by the "Evangelical" Baptist Union of England for "disturbing the peace of the churches!"