

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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“IGNORANT ZEAL”

We tend in our day to think that anyone zealous and passionate about their religious beliefs is surely acceptable to God. People will say, “It does not really matter what a person believes, as long as he sincerely believes it. If we do the best we can, then God surely will accept us. After all, even the Bible says that God is no respecter of persons. God is not a religious bigot.” Actually, as we have all come to realize post 9/11, people can and do hold to religious beliefs that are extremely dangerous. Not only Islamic fanatics, but the recent examples of Jonestown, the Heaven’s Gate crowd and David Koresh and the Branch Davidians down in Waco, Tx., are all are vivid reminders of that. Having said that, the popular and widely held view is that as long as you are sincere about your beliefs, that is really all that matters. We are confidently told by Postmodern types who populate not only the institutions of higher learning, but also our churches, that all things are relative spiritual matters. Brian McLaren, the most recognized voice in what goes by names like *Emergent* and *Postconservative*, describes himself as a *passionate* and *dedicated* follower of Jesus. In his most recent book, Everything Must Change, McLaren boldly asserted that much that passes for classical orthodoxy has been badly tainted by modernity, and as such we must begin the process of dismantling such doctrines as, the inerrancy of Scripture, any notion of penal substitution in our understanding of the atonement, as well as the traditional understanding of both eternal punishment (Hell) and even the Second Coming of Christ. Recently, Willow Creek hosted a conference on youth ministry, and featured author Brian McLaren as a speaker. At the conference, McLaren called on his hearers to rethink some doctrines of the faith, to decrease their focus on eternity in favor of social justice in the here and now. Russell Moore, director of the Carl Henry Institute at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, wrote a scathing response. He made the following points.

First of all, we are now well past the time when Christians can claim ignorance of the agenda of Brian McLaren. He has made repeatedly clear his hostility to the most basic aspects of the gospel message. McLaren’s comments at Willow Creek are not in themselves surprising. What is surprising is that a Christian conference, especially one growing out of a movement designed to reach “seekers” for Christ, would invite him to speak. When McLaren questions the existence of hell and the hope of the Second Coming, he is not a “new kind of Christian.” Such things are neither new nor Christian. They are instead a repetition of the voice of a snake in a long-ago Garden: “Has God said?” and “You shall not surely die.” It is tragic that one of the world’s most renowned evangelical churches would highlight this kind of Serpent-sensitive worship.

Second, McLaren’s comments about the biblical doctrines of hell and the Second Coming leading to violence and domination are particularly unfortunate, indeed absurd. It is these doctrines, in fact, that actually keep Christians away from such violence and domination.¹ McLaren’s supporters, however, dismiss these criticisms because McLaren is governed by his zeal and passion. Hmmm.

Another example of this kind of misguided zeal is seen in Tim Steven’s recent book Pop Goes the Church. Stevens is the Executive Pastor of the infamous Granger Community Church that first launched a billboard campaign in Granger, Ind. that promoted their new series on “My Lame Sex Life” that shows the bare legs of a couple sticking out from under the bed sheets. In Stevens’s book, he openly urges churches to mimic pop culture as a way to reach people. Example: Have a girl

dress up in provocative clothing and sing Madonna's hit song "Material Girl" as part of the *worship* service. On the church website, Stevens describes himself as a "Visionary, pragmatist, dedicated Christ follower and devoted family man" – oh, and he has zeal too. What else do you need? How about *truth* – something neither McLaren nor Stevens are overly concerned about. The Apostle Paul actually deals with this subject in the opening verses of Romans, Chapter 10.

I. PAUL'S EAGERNESS FOR ISRAEL'S SALVATION

- A. **The declaration of it** (Rom. 10:1). The chapter opens with, "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved." It is a beautiful expression of the apostle's concern for his own flesh and blood, but it is a pattern that ought to be true of us, too. The psalmist says, "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem; they shall prosper who love thee" (Psa. 122:6). Is that our concern? If we were in tune with the apostles and with our Lord, I am sure it would be.
- B. **The explanation of it** (Rom. 10:2). The apostle explains, "For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge." In 9:1-5, the apostle had spoken of his great heaviness of heart over Israel's lost condition. He pondered their great privileges, such as "the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the Law, and the service of God, and the promises." In addition, they were the descendants of the fathers, and—greatest privilege of all—the Messiah, God over all and blessed forever, had come from them. And yet, in spite of these privileges, only a remnant of Israel was saved. The great mass of the nation had turned from the Lord in unbelief and, with the Gentiles, had crucified their Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. As one can see, the apostle's consideration of their condition in chapter nine is from the objective side of things, that is, from the side of their privileges and their failure to measure up to them. If ever a man could be saved by zeal, it would be Paul. Listen to his words in Philippians, "though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinketh that he hath reasons for which he might trust in the flesh, I more: Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; CONCERNING ZEAL, PERSECUTING THE CHURCH: touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. BUT WHAT THINGS WERE GAIN TO ME, THOSE I COUNTED LOSS FOR CHRIST. Yea, doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, my Lord; for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but REFUSE, that I may win Christ, and be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith" (Phil. 3:4-9). It is easy to see that the apostle, a zealous man, regarded zeal in a wrong cause as worse than worthless. It was "refuse" for him. The important thing in spiritual things is truth, not sincerity (cf. Acts 22:3).

II. THE ERROR OF THE JEW

- A. **Their regard for legal righteousness** (Rom. 10:3a-b). The apostle now explains what the error of the Jew was, but he does it negatively. He tells the Romans how not to be saved in his review of the failure of Israel. Their mistake lay in seeking to establish their own righteousness by good works before God, and in failing to receive as a free gift the righteousness of God. They did not realize that they were sinners and could not earn a righteous standing before God. In this they were ignorant of God's righteousness. The Jews, like a wrecked auto by the sign of a steep curve in the road ahead, were a warning to all that salvation is impossible to religious, zealous people who think that they do not need a Redeemer, but can stand by their own good works. The Jews are the living

illustration that men may come to grief over Jesus Christ, if they fail to see why He had to come (cf. Gal. 2:21). They loved their legal righteousness and set about establishing their own righteousness out of pride and arrogance. We are reminded of the parable of the Pharisee and the publican told by the Lord Jesus in Luke 18:9-14. We are now inclined to look at matters differently. The Pharisee “stood and prayed thus WITH HIMSELF (!), God, I thank thee that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week; I give tithes of all that I possess.” The arrogance is obvious. In the 20th century we do not pray as the proud Pharisee. We know better than to take such a position. So we pray, “God, I thank Thee that I am not as the Pharisee!” And we do not see our pride. Jesus made it plain who was accepted before Him. He said of the publican, who stood afar off from the altar and, afraid and ashamed to even look up toward heaven, beat upon his breast in confession, saying, “God be merciful to me a sinner,” “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.” Sinners can only hope for mercy, the product of the propitiating sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ.

B. Their rejection of God’s righteousness (Rom. 10:3c). The righteousness of God, to which the nation Israel by and large did not submit itself, was the imputed righteousness that flows out of the penal substitutionary sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, the great Princeton theologian, has written of a somewhat flippant religious critic, contemplating with admiration the religion of Israel, who said in acknowledgement of what he found there, “an honest God is the noblest work of man.” Warfield said, “There is a profound truth lurking in the remark. Only it appears that the work were too noble for man; and probably man has never compassed it. A benevolent God, yes: men have framed a benevolent God for themselves. But a thoroughly honest God, perhaps never. That has been left from the revelation of God Himself to us. And this is the really distinguishing characteristic of the God of revelation: He is thoroughly honest, a thoroughly conscientious God—a God who deals honestly with Himself and us, who deals conscientiously with Himself and us. And a thoroughly conscientious God, we may be sure, is not a God who can deal with sinners as if they were not sinners. In this fact lies perhaps the deepest ground of the necessity of an expiatory atonement.”² How true that is! Our God is an honest God, and He cannot deal with us as if we were not sinners. He must punish sin. He will deal with us honestly and righteously and, if Jesus Christ had not offered the atoning sacrifice and paid in full the penalty of the people of God, they would be lost forever. But thank God! He has dealt with us honestly in Christ, and we now may stand in our substitute and have the remission of sins, and that righteously. He has paid our debt and set us free, imputing to us a righteousness that satisfies our honest God (cf. Rom. 3:21-26).

II. THE END OF THE LAW

The expression, “Christ is the end of the law,” is a notoriously difficult one, because the term “end” may be given several different senses. Perhaps, since there are several meanings that are in harmony with the teaching of the Scriptures, it would be helpful to set forth some of the suggestions.

A. First, some have taken the word “end” in the sense of *the goal*. That is, Christ is the goal of the Law. The Law was intended to point forward to Him by acting in its office of convictor of sin (cf. Rom. 3:20). In that sense it was the slave guardian that led men to Christ (cf. Gal. 3:24).

- B. Second**, it has been taken to mean *end* in the sense of *antitype*. In this context it would mean that all the types of the Old Testament pointed on to Christ. He is the One to whom the Levitical cultus pointed, being the burnt offering, the peace offering, the meal offering, the sin and trespass offerings, the Passover, etc. (cf. Heb. 10:1). It is true that the Old Testament is full of illustrations of the coming Redeemer: they pointed on to Him.
- C. Third**, most of the commentators have taken the word “end” in the sense of *termination*, finish, wind-up. The old order, the legal age, is done away in Christ, even as a hypothetical means of salvation (no one could be saved by the law, for all men are sinners, Christ excluded; cf. Gal. 3:10-12). The new order of the Spirit is here. This is likely the force of the text. Righteousness is only available in Jesus Christ and His sacrifice. That was something that the rich young ruler had to learn (cf. Matt. 19:16-26). The passage is the counterpart of Ephesians 2:8-9. The coming of Christ told the story of redemption needed and redemption provided, for why was the fountain filled with blood, if we do not need washing?”³

CONCLUSION: The late Jim Boice rightly declared, “We are neither justified nor sanctified by the law. But those who are justified will also be progressively sanctified by the Spirit of Christ who lives within them, and this means that they will inevitably and increasingly live righteous lives. If they do not, they are not Christians.”⁴ No amount of religious *zeal* will compensate one way or the other. A person can be *zealous* to keep the law or *zealous* to be free from any relationship to the law – and all to no avail. Stott put it this way. “But the abrogation of the law gives no legitimacy either to antinomians, who claim that they can sin as they please because they are ‘not under law but under grace’ (6:1, 15), or to those who maintain that the very category of ‘law’ has been abolished by Christ and that the only absolute left is the command to love. When Paul wrote that we have ‘died’ to the law, and been ‘released’ from it (7:4, 6), so that we are no longer ‘under’ it (6:15), he was referring to the law as the way of getting right with God. Hence the second part of verse 4. The reason Christ has terminated the law is *so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes*. In respect of salvation, Christ and the law are incompatible alternatives. If righteousness is by the law it is not by Christ, and if it is by Christ through faith it is not by the law. Christ and the law are both objective realities, both revelations and gifts of God. But now that Christ has accomplished our salvation by his death and resurrection, he has terminated the law in that role. ‘Once we grasp the decisive nature of Christ’s saving work,’ writes Dr. Leon Morris, ‘we see the irrelevance of all legalism.’”⁵ Augustus Toplady captured it best with this line from his great hymn *Rock of Ages*, “could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow, all for sin could not atone.”

ENDNOTES

¹ R. Moore, “Serpent-Sensitive Worship,” http://www.henryinstitute.org/commentary_print.php?cid=463. cf. also the review of McLaren’s book by John Wilson, “Everything Hasn’t Changed: An Apocalyptic Brian McLaren strives to reframe Jesus and discipleship,” *Christianity Today* Jan. 2008.

² Benjamin Breakinridge Warfield, “Modern Theories of the Atonement,” *Studies in Theology* (Oxford, 1932), p. 296.

³ Cf. Bruce, p. 203; Barrett, pp. 197-98; Kasemann, pp. 282-83; Black, p. 138, etc. *Termination* seems to have won the consent of the majority of the commentators, with Sanday and Headlam giving it important support (cf. pp. 284-85).

⁴ J. M. Boice, *Romans: An Expository Commentary III* (Baker, 1996) p. 1171.

⁵ J. R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans* (IVP, 1994) p. 281.