

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE SHACK AND BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

The fastest growing branch of Protestantism today is Pentecostalism. Actually, this group is more appropriately classified as a direct descendant not of the Reformation, but of the Radical Reformation that troubled the Reformers as much as Rome. Calvin referred to them as, “Fanatics, abandoning Scripture and flying over to revelation casting down all the principles of godliness!”¹ Among the claim of those who embrace Pentecostalism is the adamant assertion that God *speaks* outside of the Bible. Jack Deere, the author of two recent books designed to convince non-Pentecostals to embrace this charismatic distinctive, strongly maintains that *everything* in the book of Acts should be duplicated today – including God-inspired revelation. How those like Deere can advocate this strange concept of inspiration in a theologically coherent fashion *and* insist that they also hold to a closed canon remains a deep concern. While Deere wants to affirm as emphatically as possible the authority of Scripture, he ends up equally emphatic in his denial of Scripture’s sufficiency since the Bible (in his view) *must* be supplemented by ongoing contemporary revelations. In the final analysis Deere ends up with Scripture being subservant to a charismatic experience. *Sola scriptura* is not a concern to Deere. This is not something new, as students of church history will readily recognize. The Reformers had to deal with this phenomenon when confronting certain extremists in what is known as the radical reformation. One such individual was Thomas Müntzer, who, like Deere, was deeply concerned with spiritual issues, particularly the need to be really sure of divine direction. This assurance could not come from the Bible (misinterpretation abounded on every hand). The only way Müntzer could have the kind of assurance he sought was for God to speak directly to him, which he claimed happened. Müntzer was prepared to claim that he could always rightly interpret the voice of God outside of Scripture. Martin Luther responded to Thomas Müntzer with his famous statement: “I would not listen to Müntzer if he had swallowed the Holy Ghost feathers and all!” Jack Deere, like Müntzer before him, is calling the church to seek divine revelation *outside* the Scripture, and like Müntzer, Deere is supremely confident in his abilities to rightly interpret these extra-biblical sources of revelation. The sons of the radical reformation are still with us. I would much rather follow Luther and the rest of the Reformers in affirming *sola scriptura*.²

As we have already documented, the central character in the novel, Mack, rejects the view that the Bible is God’s final word. “In seminary he had been taught that God had completely stopped any overt communication with moderns, preferring to have them only listen to and follow sacred Scripture, properly interpreted, of course. God’s voice had been reduced to paper, and even that paper had to be moderated and deciphered by the proper authorities and intellects...Nobody wanted God in a box, just in a book” (pp. 65-66). Young would prefer a God who communicates with us in our thoughts rather than on paper (i.e., the Bible) (p. 195). Realizing the subjectivity of such revelation, he assures us that we will “begin to better recognize [the Holy Spirit’s] voice as we continue to grow our relationship” (p. 196). The centrality and sufficiency of Scripture is openly questioned. Instead, God now communicates through an endless variety of ways, all of which are

in the arena of personal experiences. “You will learn to hear my thoughts in yours” (p. 195), says Sarayu (who is portrayed as the incarnation of the Holy Spirit). “You might see me in a piece of art, or music, or silence, or through people, or in Creation, or in your joy and sorrow. My ability to communicate is limitless, living and transforming, and it will always be tuned to Papa’s goodness and love. And you will hear and see me in the Bible in fresh ways. Just don’t look for rules and principles; look for relationship—a way of coming to be with us” (p. 198). He may reveal Himself savingly through stories that merely and loosely parallel the story of Jesus’ sacrifice (p. 185). Despite the numerous accolades from many high-profile Evangelicals, the overt mysticism that characterizes *The Shack* is completely foreign to historic evangelicalism. B. B. Warfield rightly noted, “Evangelical Christianity interprets all religious experience by the normative revelation of God recorded for us in the Holy Scriptures, and guides, directs, and corrects it from these Scriptures, and thus molds it into harmony with what God in His revealed Word lays down as the normal Christian life. The mystic, on the other hand, tends to substitute his religious experience for the objective revelation of God recorded in the written Word, as the source from which he derives his knowledge of God, or at least to subordinate the expressly revealed Word as the less direct and convincing source of knowledge of God to his own religious experience. The result is that the external revelation is relatively depressed in value, if not totally set aside. In the history of Christian thought; mysticism appears accordingly as that tendency among professing Christians which looks within, that is, to the religious feelings, in its search for God. It supposes itself to contemplate within the soul the movements of the divine Spirit, and finds in them either the sole sources of trustworthy knowledge of God, or the most immediate and convincing sources of that knowledge, or, at least, a coördinate source of it alongside of the written Word. The characteristic of Christian mysticism, from the point of view of religious knowledge, is therefore its appeal to the ‘inner light,’ or ‘the internal word,’ either to the exclusion of the external or written Word, or as superior to it and normative for its interpretation, or at least as coördinate authority with it, this ‘inner light’ or ‘internal word’ being conceived not as the rational understanding but as the immediate deliverance of the religious sentiment. As a mere matter of fact, now, we lack all criteria, apart from the written Word, to distinguish between those motions of the heart which are created within us by the Spirit of God and those which arise out of the natural functioning of the religious consciousness. This substitution of our religious experience—or ‘Christian consciousness,’ as it is sometimes called—for the objective Word as the proper source of our religious knowledge ends therefore either in betraying us into purely rationalistic mysticism, or is rescued from that by the postulation of a relation of the soul to God which strongly tends toward pantheizing mysticism.”³

I. THE APOSTLE'S RESOLUTIONS

Notice how Peter stresses his responsibility. He has a two-fold resolve:

A. To Be Always Reminding

What is it that he wishes them to remember? --"these things" (v. 12), a reference back to vv. 1-11 which he calls "the truth you now have." Peter wanted the knowledge his readers possessed to result in action--to know truth in order to do the truth. Peter was, even to his dying day, always mindful of Jesus' charge to him, "Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17).

B. To Cause Them to Remember

Again, note the expression "these things" (v. 15). The Apostle's priorities were with the great truths (doctrines) of the Christian faith--not with passing fancies of the culture.

II. THE APOSTLE'S CONVICTIONS

The foundation of Peter's resolutions rested upon his firm conviction that the Gospel is true.

A. The Apostolic Testimony

Peter was one of the eyewitnesses of Jesus' earthly coming. The Apostolic testimony was this: Christ the Messiah (the promised Deliverer) is come. He is Jesus of Nazareth. He has the power to forgive sins. He was crucified, dead, and buried; and He is risen from the dead and has been exalted on high.

B. The Foundation of the Apostolic Testimony

Peter, along with the other Apostles, was an eyewitness to Jesus' majesty. What did this involve?

1. *They Witnessed Miracles by Jesus*

Notice that Peter does not appeal to miracles done by his own hand.

2. *They Witnessed Fulfilled Prophecy*

Notice Peter's disclaimer, "we did not follow cleverly invented stories" (1:16). The term *stories* in Greek is "myths." According to Peter, false teachers are teaching the church members "destructive heresies" (2:1) and "stories they have made up" (2:3). They will scoff at Christ's promise to return, Peter adds (3:3-4). These teachers deny the historical basis of the gospel message, and instead present their own myths. What is a myth? A myth is a story which man has formulated to express his own desires without any reference to reality. Because of its man-centered focus, a myth is devoid of redemptive power (see I Tim. 1:4; 4:7; II Tim. 4:4; Titus 1:14). By contrast, Scripture originates with God. The Bible is divinely inspired, rooted in history, and unquestionably true. And lastly, the gospel message redeems man from sin and glorifies God. Peter calls the myths of the false prophets "cleverly invented stories." He says that the apostles refused to follow manmade fables and rejected their alleged authority. In his epistle, Peter does not explain the content of these stories but rather reminds the readers of the context of the gospel.⁴

III. THE APOSTLE'S EXHORTATION

Peter urged them to pay close attention to the written Word--"as to a light shining in a dark place" (v. 19).

A. Pay Attention

The KJV has "to take heed," and the ESV reads "do well to pay attention." Peter used the word PROSECHONTES which literally means, "holding your mind upon." The word actually means to focus the attention of the mind. This involves reading, of course, but the thought is much stronger. "Diligent study" is implied because close attention and considerable effort of thought are the import of Peter's words.

B. The Light of Scripture

Note the reason why Christians are to take heed to the written word. It is "a light shining in a dark place." The imagery Peter uses is picturesque. Scripture is likened to a lamp (cf. Psalm 119:104,130). It is light shining in a "dark place."⁵ The Puritan giant John Owen wrote, "It is the Kingdom of Satan, filled with darkness and confusion. Superstition, idolatry, lying vanities, wherein men know not at all what they do nor whither they go, fill the whole world, even as it is at this day. And the minds of men are naturally in darkness; there is a blindness upon them that they cannot see nor discern spiritual things, no, not when they are externally proposed unto them."⁶

CONCLUSION: I pointed out last week that evangelical churches are often blindly naïve about the tremendous impact culture has on shaping our perceptions and worldview. This is particularly the case when it comes to personal guidance and questions having to do with Biblical authority. Many Evangelicals who have fallen prey to cultural accommodation blissfully think that their perceived relevance is an obvious sign of God's blessing. The Bible is actually appealed to in order to justify their pragmatic pursuit of success (as the World defines success in terms of numerical growth). This kind of worldliness is rarely seen for what it is. David Wells astutely observes, "This rearrangement of meaning around the self, around its moods, needs, intuitions, aches, and ambiguities, has entered the church. Its presence is signaled wherever there are those who think, or act, as if the purpose of life is to find ways of actualizing the self, realizing it, and crafting it through technique or purchase, instead of restraining it out of moral considerations and in this sense putting it to death. Where Christian faith is offered as a means of finding personal wholeness rather than holiness, the church has become worldly. There are many other forms of worldliness that are comfortably at home in the evangelical church today. Where it substitutes intuition and feelings for the biblical truth, it is being worldly. Where its appetite for the Word has been lost in favor of light discourses and entertainment, it is being worldly. Where it has restructured what it is and what it offers around the rhythms of consumption, it is being worldly, for customers are actually sinners whose place in the church is not to be explained by a quest for self-satisfaction but by a need for repentance. Where it cares more about success than about faithfulness, more about size than spiritual health, it is being worldly. Where the centrality of God to worship is lost amidst the need to be distracted and to have fun, the church is being worldly because it is simply accommodating itself to the preeminent entertainment culture in the world. Is it not odd that in so many church services each Sunday, services that are ostensibly about worshipping *God*, those in attendance may not be obligated to think even once about His greatness, grace, and commands? Worship in such contexts often has little or nothing to do with God. In these and many other ways, the church today is being worldly precisely because it is also modern. And it is its modernity that conceals from its view its worldliness."⁷ Peter declares the written Word to be shining light. It is made more certain.⁸ In what sense is it more certain? Peter is saying that the Holy Scriptures are more certain than experience--even the experience of an apostle! (cf. Paul's remarks in Galatians 1:1-6). You can be led astray, regardless of how sincere you are, by experience. "Take heed," said William Bridge, "and attend to the Scriptures, for they are our great and most sure light, whereunto ye do well if ye take heed, as unto a light shining in a dark place. Oh, then take heed thereunto."⁹

ENDNOTES

¹ Cf. W. Balke, Calvin and The Anabaptist Radicals (Eerdmans, 1981) p. 98.

² Cf. my review of Deere in Reformation & Revival Journal (Vol. 8, No. 2, Spring 1999) pp. 181-183.

³ B. B. Warfield, Biblical and Theological Studies (rpt. P & R, 1970) p. 450. Elsewhere Warfield wrote that this kind of mysticism leads to the deceitfulness of the currents of feeling which flow up and down in our deceitful hearts. "This pathway has been traveled by the mystics, and we have as the result the clash of rival revelations, and the deification of the most morbid of human imaginations. Here neither the objective truth of a revealed word nor adherence to rational thinking is allowed to check the wild dreaming of a soul that fancies itself divine, or the confusion of our weakest sentiments with the strong voice of God; and men are forbidden to clarify their crude fancies by right reason (as in the doctrine of absorption in God), or to believe God's own testimony to his real nature (as with reference to his personality)." Selected Shorter Writings of B. B. Warfield II (P & R, 1976) p. 670

⁴ S.J. Kistemaker, Peter and Jude: New Testament Commentary (Baker, 1987) p. 264.

⁵ The idea conveyed by the word "dark place," AUCHMĒRŌI TOPŌI, is very vivid. It refers to a parched, squalid, dirty, dark and murky place. This pictures the human mind that is ignorant of God. "Darkness covers the earth, and gross darkness the people" (Isaiah 60:2).

⁶ The Works of John Owen IV (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), p. 97.

⁷ D.F. Wells, "The Word in the World" in The Compromised Church: The Present Evangelical Crisis ed. J. Armstrong (Crossway, 1998) p. 31.

⁸ The literal meaning is "durable or permanent" in the sense that it is steady, steadfast, from the word BEBAIOTERON, cf. Gordon Clark, II Peter: A Short Commentary (P&R, 1972), p. 28.

⁹ The Works of William Bridge (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1989), p. 449.