

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

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| Series: | Scripture Memory | | Pastor/Teacher |
| Number: | 121 | | Gary L.W. Johnson |
| Text: | Romans 8:1 | | |
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THE ABSOLUTE FINALITY OF “NO CONDEMNATION”

“Are you sure?” This question has become the calling card of Evangelicals who have embraced *Postmodernism* and as such very much like being identified as “post-conservatives.” The postmodern mindset, with its pronounced epistemology that emphatically denies the possibility of (or need) for propositional truth, is warmly embraced by these purported Evangelicals. Truth, they declare, is not found in statements that correspond to reality (an old-fashioned notion they proudly tell us, that is rationalistic and rooted in the Enlightenment).¹ Truth, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. It is only a matter of one’s perspective.² Evangelicals associated with what goes by the name the *Emergent Church* embrace this postmodern mindset about truth and then turn around and apply this strange concept to the Bible. The Bible, we are told, is “true” only in the sense that it is personally *meaningful* to the Christian community. For example, Brian McLaren, a leading voice among Progressive Evangelicals, asserts that the Bible is *not* our foundation *nor* is it authoritative in the traditional sense.³ In McLaren’s most recent work, he attributes this to humility. “A generous orthodoxy,” he explains, “in contrast to the tense, narrow, controlling, or critical orthodoxies of so much of Christian history, doesn’t take itself too seriously. It is humble; it doesn’t claim to answer some questions that will not rest without an answer.” In this case, a non-answer is an answer.⁴ McLaren and those associated with him in the Emergent Church seem to revel in a theology of perpetual doubt. They prefer questions to answers and are seeking to *convince* (note the irony here) their fellow Evangelicals that this sophisticated and sugarcoated form of relativism is the most effective way of reaching our postmodern world.⁵ But this kind of humility is false. The comments of G. K. Chesterton are as relevant today as ever. “What we suffer from today is humility in the wrong place. Modesty has moved from the organ of ambition . . . [and] settled upon the organ of conviction, where it was never meant to be. A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. We are on the road to producing a race of men too mentally modest to believe in the multiplication table.”⁶ More importantly, the Apostle asserted very forcefully that he was absolutely *sure* of theological certainties. “It is a faithful (very trustworthy, i.e., factual) saying that Christ came to save sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15); “The saying is sure, deserving full acceptance (another way of affirming the absolute truthfulness of this statement that we have put our hope in the living God who is the Savior of all men, and especially those who believe” (1 Tim. 4:9, 10); “The saying is sure (another trustworthy affirmation). If we die with Him, we will also live with Him” (2 Tim. 2:11; Titus 3:8); “I know whom I have believed, and am convinced (Paul’s personal conviction that this truth was indisputable) that he is able to guard which I have entrusted to him for that day” (2 Tim. 1:12). In Romans 8:1, Paul affirms another *Apostolic absolute*.

I. **FOUR GREAT WORDS AND A KEY EXPRESSION.** Romans 8:1 makes sense only to those who know themselves to be sinners “in the hands of an Angry God.”

A. **NO** (*ouden*) – The word order in the Greek text is very significant. The word *ouden* is highly emphatic by its position at the beginning of the sentence. Literally it could be translated “none at all, of any kind.” Thomas Jacomb, who I have benefitted greatly from his handling of this text, points out that there is what is called a *meiosis* in how the Apostle sets forth his case. What is a

meiosis? In rhetoric, a *meiosis* is a euphemistic figure of speech that intentionally understates something or implies that it is lesser in significance or size than it really is. The term is derived from the Greek *meioō*. Jacomb points out that, “more is to be understood than what is expressed; the privative and the positive part of the blessedness are to be linked together, and blessed be God for both! Had it been only freedom from condemnation, that would have been rich and glorious mercy; but when it is not only that, but justification and salvation too, oh here is mercy in the very height and zenith of it!”⁷

- B. **NOW** – This is a time word. It harkens back to Romans 5:6, “For while we were still weak *at the right time* Christ died for the ungodly.” Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847), one of Scotland’s great preachers/theologians, wrote a noteworthy commentary on Romans, in which he declared: “When a sinner closes with Christ, God takes him on the instant into reconciliation; and from that time are his sins washed out in the blood of the Lamb. I will remember them no more. I will make no more mention of them; and they are among the things that are behind, and which ought to be forgotten. The believer should feel his conscience to be relieved from the guilt and from the dread of them; and, instead of being any longer burdened with them as so many debts subject to a count and reckoning on some future day, he has a most legitimate warrant for looking on the account as closed, and that there is a full settlement and discharge because of them between him and God. We have heard that it is wrong in a believer to live beneath his privileges, and we fully agree in so thinking. We know not how the spirit of bondage is ever to be done away, or the joy of the gospel ever made to spring up in the heart, if, still beset with the entanglement of his scruples and of his fears, he shall suspend the remission of his sins on anything else than on the blood of Jesus. Now all that is told of that blood should assure him of a present justification; and this should send an instant peace into his bosom; and like the jailor of old, should he on hearing of the power and property thereof forthwith and from that moment rejoice. Be translated then into the sense of God being at peace with you. Receive the forgiveness of your sins, through Him whom God hath set forth as a propitiation.”⁸
- C. **THEREFORE** – This points back, as we sought to establish earlier in this series, to the nature and effects of justification that is grounded in Christ’s work of making propitiation (Rom. 3:25).
- D. **CONDEMNATION** – It’s not that we are not worthy of condemnation – we certainly are (Rom. 3:9-20). This statement is not simply descriptive of our *present* estate but our *future* estate as well.
- E. **IN CHRIST JESUS** – Charles Hodge has an excellent section in his masterful commentary. “Those who are in Christ are not exposed to condemnation. And this again is not to be understood as descriptive of their present state merely, but of their permanent position. They are placed beyond the reach of condemnation. They shall never be condemned. The meaning of a proposition is often best understood by the arguments by which it is sustained. It is so in this case. The whole chapter is a proof of the safety of believers, of their security not only from present condemnation, but from future perdition. Nothing shall ever separate them from the love of God, is the triumphant conclusion to which the apostle arrives. Those to whom there is and never can be any condemnation, are described, first as to their relation to Christ, and secondly as to their character. The first assigns the reason of their security, the second enables us to determine to whom that security belongs. First, *they are in Christ*. In what sense? This must be determined, not so much from the force of the words, as from the teachings of Scripture. 1) They are in him federally, as all men were in Adam, 1 Cor. 15:22; Rom. 5:12-21. 2) They are in him vitally, as the branch is in the vine, John 15:1-7; or, as the head and members of the body are in vital union, 1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 1:23. This union arises from the indwelling of the Holy Ghost, 1 Cor. 12:13; 6:15, 19. 3) They are in him by faith, Eph. 3:17; Gal 3:26, 27. It is not in virtue of any one of these bonds of union exclusively, but in virtue of the all (so far as adults are concerned), that there

is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. It follows from the nature of this union, that it must transform the character of those who are its subjects. If, therefore, any man is in Christ Jesus, he is a new creature, 2 Cor. 5:17; John 15:4; Phil. 3:20; Col. 2:6; 1 John 2:5; 3:6.”⁹ To be in Christ Jesus is set in opposition to “walking after the flesh.” Octavius Winslow (1808-1878), another of England’s great Evangelical preachers, wrote: “*To walk after the flesh* is to regulate the life and conduct according to our fallen and depraved nature. The *flesh*, which stands for the corrupt desires and propensities, is the sole guide of the unregenerate. They are in the flesh, they are of the flesh, and they live according to the flesh. *The works of the flesh are manifest*, and these they do. But the converse of this is the characteristic of all true believers. They *walk after the Spirit*. Possessing, in common with the unregenerate, a fleshly nature, in which there dwelleth no good thing; they also partake of a new and divine nature, of which the unregenerate do not.”¹⁰

CONCLUSION: Douglas Groothuis, in his analysis of Postmodernism (especially as articulated by the Emergent Church crowd), says that “any view of truth that makes truth somehow dependent on our culture as a whole or on our minds or wills makes truth something that we (either collectively or individually) create and control.”¹¹ This is **not** the Biblical view of truth. People like McLaren relish emphasizing the element of mystery, doubt and uncertainty – all of which are part of our finiteness. Since we are finite (and sinful) beings, we cannot *know* anything exhaustively – which is true – but that does *not* mean we can *not* actually know things. The Emergent crowd views objective truth and concrete propositions with deep suspicion and skepticism. Rob Bell, another influential voice in the Emergent Church, has recently come out and advanced the Postmodern notion that the Bible has to be read “open-ended,” i.e., we cannot possibly claim any degree of certainty in our interpretations *because* we cannot *know* anything with certainty.¹² The Apostle thought otherwise. Paul was *absolutely certain* of the fact that Christ has secured for His own the verdict of **NO CONDEMNATION**.

ENDNOTES

¹ Today we’ve lost the confidence that statements of fact can ever be anything more than just opinions; we no longer know that anything is certain beyond our subjective preferences. The word *truth* now means *true for me*, and nothing more. We have entered an era of dogmatic skepticism.” F. J. Beckwith and G. Koukl, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air* (Baker, 1998), p. 20.

² Postmodernism epistemology is self-refuting, as James Parker III points out: “Since postmodernists have shown their hand, one can easily avoid being taken in by their verbal con game. Most simply stated, postmodernism is guilty of being self-referentially absurd. When postmodernists give up the idea of objective truth, there is no reason whatsoever to take what they say as true – particularly since they have conceded up front that nothing is genuinely true.” Cf. his chapter “A Requiem for Postmodernism – Whither Now?” in *Reclaiming The Ceter: Confronting Evangelical Accommodations in Postmodern Times*, eds. M. J. Erickson, P. K. Helseth, J. Taylor (Crossway, 2004), p. 308.

³ B. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (Jossey-Bass, 2001), p. 53.

⁴ B. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Zondervan, 2004). Albert Mohler, in a very good review of this book, correctly pointed out, “The problem with *A Generous Orthodoxy*, as the author must surely recognize, is that this orthodoxy bears virtually no resemblance to orthodoxy as it has been known and affirmed by the church throughout the centuries. Honest Christians know that disagreements over issues of biblical truth are inevitable. But we owe each other at least the honesty of taking a position, arguing for that position from Scripture, and facing the consequences of our theological convictions. Orthodoxy must be generous, but it cannot be so generous that it ceases to be orthodox. Inevitably, Christianity asserts truths that, to the postmodern mind, will appear decidedly ungenerous. Nevertheless, this is the truth that leads to everlasting life. The Gospel simply is not up for renegotiation in the 21st century. A true Christian generosity recognizes the infinitely generous nature of the truth that genuinely saves. Accept no substitutes.” Cf. his article “Is a Generous Orthodoxy Truly Orthodox?” in *The Banner of Truth* (May, 2005), p. 11.

⁵ A good example of this kind of thing is McLaren’s recent remarks on homosexuality. He writes, “I hesitate in answering *the homosexual question* . . . Most of the emerging leaders I know share my agony over this question. We fear that the whole issue has been manipulated far more than we realize by political parties seeking to shave percentage points off their opponent’s

constituency. We see whatever we say get sucked into a vortex of politicized culture-wars rhetoric – and we’re pastors, evangelists, church planters, and disciple makers, not political culture warriors. Those who bring us honest questions are people we are trying to care for in Christ’s name, not cultural enemies we’re trying to vanquish . . . Frankly, many of us don’t know what we should think about homosexuality. We’ve heard all sides but no position has yet won our confidence so that we can say *it seems good to the Holy Spirit and us*. That alienates us from both the liberals and conservatives who seem to know exactly what we should think . . . If we think that there may actually be a legitimate context for some homosexual relationships, we know that the biblical arguments are nuanced and multilayered, and the pastoral ramifications are staggeringly complex. We aren’t sure if or where lines are to be drawn, nor do we know how to enforce with fairness whatever lines are drawn.” According to McLaren, the Bible simply is insufficient on this issue. He rejects *Sola Scriptura* and goes on to make this rather astonishing proposal, “Perhaps we need a five-year moratorium on making pronouncements (on Homosexuality). In the meantime, we’ll practice prayerful Christian dialogue, listening respectfully, disagreeing agreeably . . . When decisions need to be made, they’ll be admittedly provisional. We’ll keep our ears attuned to scholars in biblical studies, theology, ethics, psychology, genetics, sociology, and related fields. . . Then in five years, if we have clarity, we’ll speak; if not, we’ll set another five years for ongoing reflection. After all, many important issues in church history took centuries to figure out. Maybe this moratorium would help us resist the *winds of doctrine* blowing furiously from the left and right, so we can patiently wait for the wind of the Spirit to set our course.” *Leadership Journal* (Jan. 23, 2006). It comes as no surprise that McLaren chooses to identify with that strain of the Anabaptist (Arminian) tradition that traces its roots back to the radical reformation with its contention that the Spirit speaks *outside* of Scripture. Contra the position of the Reformers that the Spirit only speaks in Scripture and never apart from it. What McLaren is listening to is not the voice of the Spirit speaking in the Scriptures, he is listening to the voice of the spirit of the times. Michael Horton made this observation very clear to McLaren in the book *The Church In Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives*, ed. Leonard Sweet (Zondervan, 2003), p. 211.

⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Doubleday, 1957), p. 31.

⁷ Thomas Jacomb, *Sermons on The Eighth Chapter of The Epistle to The Romans* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1996), p. 20.

⁸ Thomas Chalmers, *Lectures on The Epistle of Paul, The Apostle to the Romans* (Robert Carter & Brothers, 1851), p. 231. Chalmers is best known for his sermon *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection*, which expressed his key to an authentic spirituality. He rightly noted that sin lives in the heart, and sin can only be cured by a new heart with transformed affections. Chalmers held, along with Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Richard Sibbes, Jonathan Edwards, and others – to an affective spirituality in which. Biblical faith is heart-based: *a response to God’s love that changes our deepest orientation of life from being self-centered to Christ-centered*. Chalmers’ sermon, then, offers us a captivating vision: God’s love is what changes us. As our affection for God grows – as he is revealed in Christ through the Word and affirmed to our hearts by the Spirit – our old and enslaving affections begin to be expelled. This is a spirituality that grows with a rational and volitional progression, yet it is the heart that moves both the mind and the will to change. Apart from God we bring nothing to this transformation. This is the good news of God’s love in Christ. May we all respond accordingly. <https://www.cordeo.org.uk/chalmers-sermon/>

⁹ C. Hodge, *A Commentary on Romans* rpt. Banner of Truth, 1972), p. 249.

¹⁰ O. Winslow, *No Condemnation In Christ Jesus: As Unfolded in The Eighth Chapter of The Epistle To The Romans* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1991), p. 13.

¹¹ D. Groothuis, “Truth Defined and Defended” in *Reclaiming The Center* (p. 78).

¹² R. Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (Zondervan, 2005), p. 28. Echoing the old Liberal mantra, Bell says rather candidly that the Bible is a “human product . . . rather than the product of divine fiat” (p. 7). As a result, the Scriptures are not primarily the factual revelation of God acting in human history, but simply various metaphors to help us understand our own subjective experiences. Listen to his account of the Fall, “Is the greatest truth about Adam and Eve that it happened or that it happens? This story . . . is true for us because it is **our** story. We have all taken the fruit. We have all crossed boundaries . . . This is why the Bible loses its power for so many communities. They fall into the trap of thinking that the Bible is just about things that happened a long time ago” (p. 8). This is in direct contrast to the Apostle Paul, who did not see Adam’s fall as a metaphor to interpret our own experiences! The whole point of Romans 5:12-21 is to establish the historical fact and theological truth of the disobedience of the First Adam and the obedience of the Last Adam. Is Christ’s act of obedience a metaphor to help us understand our own experience of obedience?! The distressing thing about McLaren and Bell is that they were both recently named among the fifty most influential Evangelicals in America.