



## LAW AND MINISTRY IN THE CHURCH

An Informal Essay on Some Historical Developments (1972-1984)

By Jon Zens, 1984

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[In early 1984, Drew Garner of Houston, Texas, called and asked if I would write a paper about my pilgrimage toward Christ in the New Covenant. He needed this to use in his research for an historical paper he was presenting at a pastor's conference. This is it.]

In the past few years requests have appeared for “background” history regarding some of the issues dealt with in *Searching Together* (formerly *Baptist Reformation Review* [BRR]). This essay will overview some historical highlights based on the author's experiences. The historical events will be considered with reference to two issues: the law/gospel debate and the discussion of what is entailed in a functioning priesthood of all believers.

There are dangers in writing history. One can *revise* history in order to make it fit a desired pattern; or one could *romanticize* history in order to glorify a particular tradition. I have tried to be objective with the facts, and have made only a few interpretive observations.

It must be stressed at the outset that I love and respect those mentioned in the course of this essay. In reporting and commenting past events, I only

wish to contribute to a *Christ-centered* discussion of issues, and to encourage others to maintain an *open stance* toward one another. If disappointment over the beliefs and actions of others is expressed, it is done in a context of full acceptance of these brethren.

## 1. THE LAW/GOSPEL DEBATE

### *"God's Covenants"*

It was in 1967, while at Bob Jones University, that I came to believe that God's initiative in salvation was crucial. I transferred to Covenant College in 1968. My reading during the period of 1968-1973 was "Puritan/Reformed" in emphasis.

My pointed reflection on the law/gospel issue began around 1972. Greg Hufstetler and I were alternating on the chapters of the 1742 *Philadelphia Confession of Faith* in the Sunday School of Sovereign Grace Baptist Church in Prospectville, Pa. The chapter "Of God's Covenant" fell on my shoulders.

After an in-depth study of that chapter, I presented two lessons: "Covenants and the O.T." and "Covenants in the N.T." I fully expected to be thrown out of the church, for I not only rejected the Dispensationalist interpretation which stressed *discontinuity* in God's program, but I also felt compelled to reject the *one 'Covenant of Grace'* (continuity) position of Covenant Theology. I concluded that neither system did justice to the biblical data, and that both systems had to skip over or twist much Scripture in order to sustain their positions. Happily, the listeners (including about ten students from Westminster Seminary) were open to what I taught, and thought that the questions I'd raised were worth further investigation.

After these two Sunday School lessons, my thought was not stimulated again on this subject until the publication of E.W. Johnson's article on "Imputation"

(BRR, 3:2, Summer, 1974, 21-45).

### *Is There A "Covenant of Grace"?*

I wrote a response, "Reflections on E.W. Johnson's 'Imputation' Article" in BRR, 4:1, 1975, pp. 57-62. The preparing of this study brought me to again face some issues in "Federal Theology." In a passing remark, I agreed with E.W. Johnson's reservations about the "Covenant of Redemption."

Specifically, however, it should be acknowledged that his point is especially well taken regarding the alleged "covenant of redemption" . . . As theologians have presented this "covenant of grace," they have simply posited its existence, and have not shown its presence in the Bible. There is an eternal purpose of God in Christ Jesus, and there are historical covenants revealed in Scripture. But a "covenant of grace" which stands above history does not appear to be a Scriptural concept ("Reflections," p.57).

Thoughts on this subject were not aroused again until several years later when I finally read a book that had been on my shelf for years, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*.

While living in Philadelphia, I traveled to Wilmington, DE., in 1969 to visit Puritan-Reformed Book Service ~ then operating out of Walt Hibbard's garage! Walt pressed me to purchase Leonard Verduin's *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* (Eerdmans, 1964). I reluctantly bought it, and it sat on a shelf until June, 1977, when ~ at the urging of several brothers earlier in the year ~ I read it carefully.

This book was singularly helpful to me. It cleared a lot of fog out of my head, and the pieces of theology and church history that I'd been wrestling with since 1969 began to fall together. Verduin conclusively showed two things: (1) the visible church since Constantine was informed more by the old than the new covenant; (2) the issue between the Catholics/Protestants and the Anabaptists

was a radically different conception of "what the church of Christ is and what its relation is to that which lies around it" (Reformers, p.16; cf. pp.23, 38,50,54).

The reading of *Reformers* confirmed to me that something needed to be said about the issues of law/grace and a "believing church."

***"The first shot fired in twenty years"***

I prepared a manuscript and sent it to seven respected brothers before it was published. Only a few responded. The article - which John Reisinger called "the first shot fired in twenty years" - asked the penetrating question, "Is There A 'Covenant of Grace?'" It appeared in the Autumn, 1977, *BRR*. This article was to initiate heated discussion, and even bitter controversy.

Some positive responses were generated. The only negative written reply came from a Westminster Seminary student, and this was printed in the Spring, 1978, *BRR*, along with my follow-up article, "Crucial Thoughts On 'Law' in the New Covenant."

***"Neo-dispensationalism" and "Neo-antinomianism"?***

In 1978 and 1979 the opposition to the articles in *BRR* accelerated (accompanied also by a number of positive encouragements!). Walt Chantry, a leader among the "Reformed Baptists" in the northeast, wrote a brief letter and accused me (without providing any documentation) of propagating "neo-dispensationalism" and "neo-antinomianism" (July, 1978).

I spent hours at the Vanderbilt Library in Nashville researching "antinomianism," and documented in my lengthy reply to Walt why I repudiated it. I re-sent Walt my articles that disturbed him, and asked him to underline any sentences that bothered him, and told him that I would be glad to consider any points he wished to make (August, 1978). No reply was ever received.

## *Discovering the Anabaptists*

You don't hear much about the Anabaptists in the standard church histories ~ and when mentioned, they are often portrayed as "heretics." It is ironic that men who have been quick to label Anabaptist excesses as "fanatical" are so slow to apply the same label to the Catholics and Protestants who murdered people for their non-compliance with established religion.

The Autumn, 1978, *BRR* was devoted to acquainting people with a heritage that was far ahead of its times in certain areas. Subsequent history showed that "The Stepchildren (Anabaptists) were heading in the right direction and their opponents in the wrong" (G.R. Beasley-Murray, "Postscript," *Reformers* [Paternoster], p.277). In the two areas of focus here (law and ministry), the Anabaptists broke with the past and asserted: (1) that there was a *new* covenant with Christ as its focus and norm; and (2) that there was a new community in Christ which could assemble and function in simplicity. The Anabaptists had faults; but we err not to profit from the insights which cost them their lives.

### ***"This Is My Beloved Son, Hear Him"***

I pursued research on law/gospel at Vanderbilt for months. I read thousands of pages on "Christian Ethics." Something was missing. The bulk of the treatments simply saw ethics as an exposition of the Ten Commandments. I asked the Lord to guide me to a book that would have some insight into this matter. Not long after, I found A.J. Bandstra's *The Law and the Elements of the World: An Exegetical Study in Aspects of Paul's Teaching* (Kok, 1964). This was a breakthrough for me. Then, while at Westminster in December of 1978, I came upon F.F. Bruce's *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*. This book further confirmed that the direction I was heading in was not unique.

In 1978 I had received a negative letter from Don Garlington, who was then teaching at Trinity Ministerial Academy in New Jersey. I met with Don for a few

hours at the Marriott Hotel in Saddlebrook, New Jersey, in December of 1978. First, we discussed his letter and he agreed to modify the ending for publication. Then I read to him some quotations from Samuel Bolton's *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, and asked him if he felt that these Puritan remarks reflected sensitivity to N.T. teaching. He agreed that Bolton's statements were not entirely accurate. I felt that he was between a rock and a hard place, knowing that the Puritan view had some problems, yet teaching in a school where Puritanism had to be upheld.

In January, 1979, I prepared a lengthy manuscript and sent it out to about twenty-five people with a request for feedback. Many encouraging remarks were received in response to "My Beloved Son."

In the Winter, 1978, *BRR*, eight positive responses and the negative letter from Don Garlington were printed as lead-ins to my article, "This Is My Beloved Son, Hear Him: A Study of the Development of Law in the History of Redemption." This was my most exhaustive attempt to set forth a Christ-centered approach to ethics.

### ***"I was almost a Presbyterian"***

In October, 1978, I spoke with Thom Smith at the Banner of Truth Conference in Atlanta. In April, 1979, Thom called me and apologized for giving me the "cold shoulder." Further, he told me that he had re-read the articles in *BRR*, and felt that I was possibly opening the way for a consistent "Baptist theology." His theology changed significantly as the months rolled on, as did the thinking of his close friend, Ron McKinney.

I didn't realize it at the time, but when I had written Thom a letter in early 1979 he was undergoing much theological turmoil, and was almost to the point of becoming a Presbyterian. Reflecting on the one-two punch effect of a very providential plane trip with John Reisinger and my letter, Thom said in October, 1979:

I got home and Jon Zens had written me a letter and just took me apart . . . *very kind, very gentle.* I'll tell you, Jon has been a Christian through all the muck and dung that has been slung on him in the past six months to a year. He's really shown a Christian spirit in it all. His letter savored of the breath of Christ (Men's Meeting, Reformed Baptist Church of Dallas, 10/19/79).

***"He almost made me a Baptist!"***

In January, 1979, I traveled from Nashville to a preacher's fellowship in Dalton, Ga., where John Reisinger and Ferrell Griswold were to speak on law-related subjects. I went with fear and trembling, wondering if I would be shunned. John's exposition of Galatians 3 and 4 was excellent. He opened his talk by asking how many present read *BRR* ~ a few hands went up. He then mentioned the significance he felt was attached to my article on the "Covenant of Grace," and commented that my editorial, "What Can We Learn From Reformation History?" "almost made me a Baptist!"

***"Paul did not follow the reasoning of BRR"***

At the Summer, 1979, Reformed Baptist Family Conference Walt Chantry delivered some messages on the "Kingdom of God." In them he attacked the positions of the Reconstructionist movement and *BRR*. Walt suggested that our position carried with it a denial that there is only one people of God and one way of salvation, a denial that the O.T. is relevant for now, and a denial that the heathen are sinners (because they are not "under law"). While he quoted from the Reconstructionists, he never once cited anything from *BRR* to document his strong (and wrong) accusations.

In my reply to these tapes (August, 1979), I tried to show Walt that he had totally misconstrued what I believed. Since Al Martin introduced these tapes by announcing that the substance of Walt's messages would be put into book form, I pleaded with Walt in my reply to not go into print with these misrepresentations of my position.

Walt replied, but still made no attempt to document his allegations (September, 1979). His displeasure was obvious:

It is clear that some major shifts have been made. And your new categories have sown confusion in our churches ~ not about what we shall call Biblical teachings. Your writings have provoked a new revolt against the very Biblical idea of righteousness and altered the Biblical understanding of the gospel . . . . What has been put into print has been damaging to the cause of Christ . . . . With complete distaste for controversy, but with greater aversion to your dangerous and confusing novelties, Walter J. Chantry, Pastor.

***"Cranks who foment against Sinai"***

In 1980 Walt's book appeared, *God's Righteous Kingdom*. While in the tapes he named names, the book doesn't ~ the reader is left to figure out who the two "enemies" are. In the course of this hook, he continues to brandish outlandish claims: "others argue that no moral law applicable to Christians may be found in the O.T."; "Sinaiphobia which would eliminate any Mosaic code as invalid for N.T. times"; "others wish only to be rid of anything Moses touched"; "cranks who foment against Sinai."

In response, I said in part:

I am also disconcerted and hurt when someone with undocumented pontification utterly misrepresents my convictions (especially after I pleaded with you not to misrepresent me before you went into print) . . . . I am at a loss to know what else to say, for my previous letters to you have expressed parallel concerns, yet you have gone on with your unloving, unscholarly course (December 1, 1980).

In his reply, he did finally give some quotations from my writings, but they certainly did not begin to substantiate the colored language used in the book.. "For substantiation of what I have to say, I could almost quote the entirety of the articles that you have printed in *BRR*" (December 10, 1980).



## *The Birth of the Council on Baptist Theology*

At the fall Banner of Truth Conference in 1979, Ron McKinney spoke with Iain Murray, Ernie Reisinger and others about the possibility of having a conference where some aspects of Reformed theology could be discussed and evaluated by people of differing viewpoints. The answer was "No" ~ unless Banner of Truth had control of who would speak and what topics would be addressed. Ron found this unacceptable. After talking with others, the idea was born for a conference where traditions could be discussed and evaluated, and Ron began to make plans for the Summer "1980 Council on Baptist Theology" to be held in Plano, TX.

Ron McKinney called me in January of 1980 and asked if I would speak at the Council in May. My subject would be "An Examination of the Presuppositions of Covenant and Dispensational Theology."

The conference was well-attended, there was a good spirit among the attendees, the topics dealt with were refreshing and edifying, and discussion was encouraged. It was gratifying to me to see the Lord Jesus lifted up in the New Covenant, and to see so many brethren rejoicing in (and wrestling with) the issues we had sought to unfold in *BRR*.

"As I Have Loved You': The Starting Point of Christian Obedience" (*BRR*, 9:2, 1980) was brought to this conference and was well-received.

## *A Man On A Pilgrimage: RDB*

I started receiving *Present Truth* (now *Verdict*) at Westminster Seminary (1972). I didn't read it much, however, until 1975. The emphasis on justification was helpful to me at this time.

In August, 1979 ~ through a series of fluke circumstances ~ I heard about some unadvertised meetings at a Ramada Inn in Nashville. For three days the editor of *Verdict*, Robert D. Brinsmead, was addressing about 150 Adventist-

oriented people. I came Friday night and spoke with RDB and Jack Zwemer in their motel room for about two hours. We also talked for another two hours on Sunday night.

I was impressed by Brinsmead's teachable, open spirit. He obviously did not feel threatened by my pointed and probing questions. One area that I asked him about was the idea that the law had to do a "work" before the gospel could come to folks. His magazine had been permeated with this concept. I suggested that if all things are to be approached through Christ, why do we put the law ahead of Him in evangelism? Where in Acts were the Ten Commandments preached before the gospel? He said he thought I had some good points and that he would reflect upon them. On Sunday night I gave him Richard Gaffin's *The Centrality of the Resurrection*, Meredith Kline's *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, and all of the back issues of *BRR*.

In January, 1980, Brinsmead called from California, just before he was to leave for Australia. He said that he had read the back issues, that he thought we were on to something important, and that he would study these matters closely in Australia.

In 1981 some brilliant essays appeared in *Verdict*. "Sabbatarianism Re-examined," "Jesus and the Law," and "The Heart of N.T. Ethics" presented a Christ-centered approach to ethics. It was certainly heartening to see this shift by the largest English-speaking theological journal in the world at that time (sadly, since mid-1984 RDB went markedly downhill).

### ***"Wild bulls propagating classic Antinomianism"***

In February of 1980, Al Martin presented an emotionally charged message on "Law and Gospel" to a pastors' fellowship in Canada. In it he echoed the charges Waif Chantry - "neo-antinomianism," "*de facto* dispensationalism," "nothing is regulative for the Christian but the N.T.

documents," "Moses no longer has any valid function in the church of Jesus Christ."

In my March 25, 1980, reply to Pastor Martin, I had to ask him just how he would document his sweeping charges, and why he had to resort to such highly charged emotionalism (e.g., saying that we encouraged people to "stop their ears to Moses," and "they go on like wild bulls propagating their views of classic antinomianism"). I further said:

As Pastor D.M. Canright said, "men who are conscious of being in the right can afford to state the position of their opponents fairly." . . . You do your position no help by saying that *BRR* has put a "concrete barrier" between the two Testaments, and that "nothing is carried over." No, Pastor Martin, such biased sentiments cannot be documented in *BRR*. If your position is right, then please manifest a Christian, brotherly approach in stating the position of your opponents fairly (3/25/80).

No reply was ever received from Pastor Martin.

One of the pastors who attended this presentation in Toronto, James Shantz, wrote a letter to Al Martin in which he said, "I continue to be greatly dismayed by your lecture on Law and Grace, as I have continued to study it on tape. Your declaration that *BRR* . . . is teaching antinomianism reveals that you yourself have not carefully studied all the materials." Further, Shantz wrote a lengthy paper, "The Puritan Giant and the Antinomian 'Ghost,'" in which he raised a number of questions about traditional Reformed theology.

### *The Sabbath and Other Matters*

During the period of 1979-1980, *BRR* devoted much space to the foundations of N.T. ethics. Both the Spring and Winter 1979 issues dealt with the relationship of law and gospel. Bob Morey asked, "Is Sunday the 'Christian Sabbath?'," and

Albertus Pieters (a paedobaptist leader in the Reformed Church of America in the 1940's) showed much insight about the place of the Ten Commandments in the history of redemption in "The Seed of Abraham and the Old Covenant" (Spring, 1979). I dealt with "Principles of New Covenant Giving" (Summer, 1979), W.B. Selbie investigated "The Influence of the O.T. On Puritanism" (Autumn, 1979), and Don Price interacted with the attempts to connect an *imperative* to Sunday worship (Winter, 1980).

A sort of (unintended) culmination occurred in the Spring, 1981, *BRR*. There were lengthy review articles of Walt Chantry's *God's Righteous Kingdom* and Robert Brinsmead's *Judged by the Gospel: A Review of Adventism*. The dynamic N.T. approach to law and gospel was stated forcefully by RDB:

[Paul's] appeals on how to live are made on the basis of what God has done for us in Christ. It is in view of God's gospel mercies that we are to present our lives as a living sacrifice to God (Rom.12:1-3) . . . . Paul virtually never appeals to the law - 'Thou shalt not.' When he demands certain behavior of the church, he appeals instead to the holy history of Christ . . . and from that stand point then makes his ethical appeal. (p.6)

Regarding "the gospel and the church," I stated:

George Wolfgang Forell makes astute observations about the tragic shift from mutual ministry to unilateral dominion in the early church:

Ethical guidance for people recently converted to Christianity and likely to bring a pervasive pagan attitude to this new life was offered at first by a polyform ministry of grace, reflected in the N.T. But as time went by moral authority was increasingly focused in an ordered ministry of bishops and

deacons (*History of Christian Ethics*, I, 39).

I personally have come to the conviction that the greatest practical need facing the church today is the recovery of the "*polyform ministry of grace*" (p.8).

As BRR from 1981 onwards began to assert the obvious disparity between the "polyform" ministry found in the N.T. and the "ordered system" of various post-apostolic traditions, then even those who agreed with our New Covenant orientation began to be displeased and concerned. This leads us to the historical overview of the second topic, "ministry in the church."

## 2. WHAT IS INVOLVED IN A FUNCTIONING PRIESTHOOD?

In the course of the shared teaching ministry we had at Sovereign Grace Baptist Church (Prospectville, Pa., 1972-1973), I brought several studies on Hebrews 3 and 10. I began to see that *mutual exhortation* was embedded in what was called "the perseverance of the saints" (Heb.3:6,14). Yet, in all of my reading of the standard Calvinistic treatises on the believer's security, I *never* saw the Hebrews' passages connected with "final perseverance." Perseverance was approached in an *individualistic* manner - those given by God to Christ will be finally saved, and none will be lost. This is very true, but I never saw the *corporate* (body) dimension developed as a key means in our "working out" of salvation. Several years later I would come to see *why* this was the case: since the edification of the church was placed on the shoulders of one man - "the minister" - the "ministry" of the saints one with another was not practiced.

## *A Penetrating Question*

After moving to Nashville in 1975, I came into contact with a "house church" in 1976. One of its members, Ken Leary, and I decided to meet regularly and work our way through Louis Berkhof's *The History of Christian Doctrines*. One day something in our study provoked Ken to ask me, "Where does the N.T. teach that 'preaching' must be central in a service - like it is in your church?" I was upset by his "impertinent" question, and gave him the pat-answer I had been taught - "1 Cor.1:21 teaches that it is through the foolishness of preaching that people are saved." Ken was not satisfied with my remarks, suggested that 'preaching' seemed to take place 'outside' the church in evangelism, and the subject was dropped. However, his question kept echoing in my mind.

I was struck with the message of 1 Timothy 3:15, and the next step in my ecclesiological pilgrimage took place when I wrote "The Local Church: The Pillar and Ground of the Truth" (*BRR*, Summer, 1977). This booklet was apparently a blessing and a challenge to many. John Alexander, then president of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, requested 100 copies to distribute among those in that organization.

The subject of ecclesiology - the doctrine of the church - became a matter of intense research. The Summer, 1978, *BRR* was devoted to "Church Government" and "Eldership in the N.T." A number expressed appreciation for Mike Parker's article on "The Basic Meaning of 'Elder' in the N.T." One pattern that emerged from the N.T. was the *plural* nature of oversight in the local church. The traditional one pastor practice appeared to be untenable.

### ***"One Man or One Another?"***

My stance on the local church was further challenged in 1979. I remember the day Al Lewis - who had moved from Wyoming to be part of our church in

Nashville – sat down with me and lovingly shared some ideas from 1 Corinthians 14 about how an assembly should function together. Again, I was driven to re-think some issues.

By December, 1979, I had completed a rough draft of an article, “Building Up the Body: One Man or One Another?” I initially sent out 65 copies of it with a cover letter requesting feedback, and by March, 1980, about 125 copies had been circulated. The feedback rolled in ~ positive, negative and mixed. Some felt that it should not be published until down the road ~ one pastor suggested three or four years! It was obviously a sensitive issue, in some crucial ways more touchy than the law/gospel debate. Hence the concern for feedback before it was published.

The sensitive nature of this article was highlighted by a phone call I received from Ron McKinney in April, 1980. He asked me if I was going to publish "One Man or One Another" immediately. I replied that I fully intended to publish it, but in the future, after the feedback was in and I had time to reflect on and digest it. He was glad, and related that if it's publication was imminent a number of men felt that I should not be allowed to speak at the upcoming "1980 Council on Baptist Theology."

As it turned out, "Building Up the Body" was published in the Summer, 1981, *BRR* ~ a year and a half after the rough draft was circulated. Before publishing it, I carefully weighed the criticisms in light of Scripture, and incorporated a number of helpful comments and changes in the final draft.

As a follow-up to "Building Up the Body," the Autumn, 1981, issue developed some "Aspects of Female Priesthood (1 Cor.11-14)" in response to questions raised by the first article.

## *Movement Toward An "Association"*

After the 1981 Council on Baptist Theology some felt that forming a Baptist association was in order. In 1981 I received an invitation to attend a steering committee meeting in Richardson, Texas., at the end of November. Several papers would be presented, and there was to be open discussion about the advisability and feasibility of forming an association.

One attitude that surfaced at this meeting several times concerned me deeply. In his opening remarks, Ron McKinney stated his conviction that "we will be a flash in the pan of church history unless we get together." John Armstrong stated in his paper that if we do not have revival and missions outreach (in the context, through an association), "I fear that we shall at best be relegated, and rightly so, to a brief footnote at best, in the Baptist history being written in our day." I got the feeling that an underlying motive for creating an association was "to be something."

## *"Problems in Our Churches"*

After John Armstrong's presentation on the evening of December 1, Thom Smith asked if I would have a meeting with several men. John's paper had already expressed discontent with *BRR* - "our persistence in writing about 'new ideas' and 'challenging the brethren' to correct this mistaken practice or that . . . will we keep 'going our own way' writing our articles and papers on issues that divide our churches and create new 'fires for pastors to spend time extinguishing?'"

In this meeting with eight men, Thom opened by expressing appreciation for the help *BRR* had been in the law/gospel discussion, but felt that the "body-life" teaching found in the magazine was not in line with Baptist tradition, and was causing division in some churches. Seven of the eight men then proceeded to express their reservations, and gave alleged examples of where *BRR* articles had caused problems in churches. No attempt was made



in this meeting to show that what was said in *BRR* was *against Christ*; it was just assumed to be in error, and not in line with Baptist doctrine. The fact that something "causes trouble" is not sufficient grounds for it to be *wrong*.

In the days following the meeting I investigated the three incidents cited, and was satisfied that the "trouble" was not our fault. The people involved were certainly appalled that blame would be imputed to me or the magazine.

### ***"Searching Together"***

In the Spring, 1982, *BRR* I asked if it was appropriate for "Baptists" to be "Reformed." But brother Glynn Taylor wrote and asked if it was right for Christians to call themselves "Baptists" ~ or anything else that only highlighted factions in the body of Christ.

In 1981 and 1982 I was privileged to speak at several West Coast *Verdict* seminars. Here, I met a number of former Seventh-Day Adventists. During these times it became evident that the title of our magazine was a hindrance to people getting into its contents. It was the kind of situation where you end up spending your time explaining what you are *not*.

This consideration, coupled with the facts that our readership was broadening, and that the ministry was not intended only for "Baptists," led to a name change: *Searching Together*. This name ~ based on Eph.4:15 and Acts 17:11 ~ expresses our innermost desire to pursue Christ in fellowship with others.

## **THE NEED: TO FOCUS ON CHRIST TOGETHER**

Our Spring, 1983, issue said some things about what churches need most. I believe that the "controversy" over law/gospel and ministry in the church over the past seven years illustrates (negatively) what we need most. All the fuss, gossip

and bad attitudes among the brethren can be attributed to a lack of *maturity* and to a great deal of *insecurity*. These two serious problems can be spiritually dealt with by the following five points.

1. *Christ must be the beginning, middle, and end of everything.* As Vernard Eller said in 1964, Christ “is the supreme revelation and the very presence of God himself.” It’s not about being right, being Baptist (or any thing else), having the right church government, having the right order of service, or having the best theology. *If it isn’t about the living Christ we might as well eat, drink, be merry and die tomorrow.*

2. We need an *unqualified acceptance* of one another in the gospel (Rom.15:7). We need to realize that our very titles (“can we admit a church into our association that does not have 'Baptist' in its name?”) in reality keep us from accepting others. We end up in practice accepting others “if . . .” Commitment to any “tradition” ends up clouding the gospel for we are then forced to defend the indefensible.

Traditional Adventism appeals to its unique doctrines as the only justification for its existence. In this it is not unlike Lutheranism, Calvinism, Campbellism [Church of Christ] or other branches of the church. Each group tends to cling to its special contribution as if that justified its existence. And generally the special contribution overwhelms the New Testament message. The only thing which justifies our right to exist either individually or corporately is the gospel. The reason why Adventism cannot face the truth of history but has created so many pious legends [as other groups have] is that it depends upon that history for its corporate justification. Yet right here it unwittingly expresses its denial of justification by Christ alone. Only one history justifies

our right to exist either individually or corporately - the holy history of Jesus of Nazareth. To embrace the gospel means that we confess that all history but Christ's stands under the judgment. It is His history plus nothing which justifies our existence." (Robert D. Brinsmead, *Judged by the Gospel*, pp. 325-359).

3. We need *non-threatening atmospheres* in our churches. Only with unqualified acceptance can we then express Christ freely to one another (Rom.15:14). Too many people in churches are intimidated, confused and scared. A letter recently received illustrates the tragedy of this problem:

As the Lord appointed us to grow through suffering and through knowledge of His Son, we all come to face problems. I want to mention a problem I have now. I hope you will understand, and maybe give me some biblical light to see the problem in a realistic way and learn from it. The problem is this. I have been going to a Baptist church for six years. As I have grown in knowledge, I have come to believe that the teaching emphasis in this church is unbiblical. They teach tithing, Sabbath-keeping, and the love of God is presented as 'grace under law.' Feeling unfed by the elders, I don't know if I should stop being among them. Should I stay and give my viewpoints according to Scripture? Sometimes in Sunday school I ask questions and they go unanswered; sometimes I explain a subject and silence is my answer. So what do I do, leave or stay?

4. We need *open agendas*. The reason letters like this can be written is because the agenda is predefined and prepackaged in most churches. If someone raises a question that is outside of the accepted parameters, they are "dealt with."

If truth is a *growing* thing in our experience then, as Vernard Eller notes, "no

group ever has the 'last word,' and must always be eager and open for new leading rather than complacent in knowledge already attained."

In 1978 many brethren thought I was a "troubler in Israel" when I started teaching a Christ-centered ethic. But they hung in there with me, and as time went on many began to see some light.

However, I believe some of these same brethren have since 1981 closed their mind to further light regarding what is involved in a functioning priesthood. I am now viewed as one disturbing the status quo. Would they be willing to work though a book like Howard Snyder's *The Problem of Wineskins*, or is the agenda closed?

When one pastor told me that my teachings were not in line with "Baptist tradition," you can see that for him the agenda was already fixed. This is the problem: commitment to *one* tradition (1) makes certain topics "taboo"; (2) allows study of "approved" topics only; (3) effectively seals a group off from learning valuable truth from the "other guys" ~ who are usually viewed as the "bad guys" (non-acceptance).

4. We need the *ability to work through things with other Christians*. It is my observation that this is the biggest lack in churches (and is a consequence of serious lacks in the first four areas mentioned above). *Most churches have no spiritual mechanisms* by which to handle (1) new aspects of truth that naturally come up in church life, (2) interpersonal conflicts, (3) "loose ends" in relationships and teachings, which have a tendency to backlog in churches.

The *problem* cannot be located strictly in right or wrong views of law/gospel or the priesthood of believers ~ important as these matters are. Paul locates our greatest needs in Eph.4:1-3 "walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Vernard Eller puts his finger on some key issues:

The preservation of fellowship is the precondition for the reception and preservation of religious truth . . . . Much more important than *having* the truth is being in a position to *receive* the truth.

Unless we see some radical improvement regarding these five areas, we have no reason to expect the situation in churches to get better. We must learn to work through the difficult times together in a setting of acceptance. Otherwise, there can be no doubt but that we will go on biting and devouring one another.

May the Lord Jesus help us in the future to see significant growth in these four areas.

- March, 1984 (updated, May 2012)



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