

MISAIMINGS

“Who concerning the Truth Have Misaimed” — 2 Tim. 2:18

Misaiming concerning God’s Law and the Believer

Misaiming: “The Law not only reveals what pleases God, it propels us along the pathway of obedience....The incitement of the Law to obedience is a means of grace for the believer. The Law, once we are regenerate, far from slaying us, now excites our souls to please our Savior” (R. C. Sproul, *The Soul’s Quest for God*, 113-114).

Truth: Sproul’s book distracts the believer from God’s New Testament dispensation. His laudation of the law serves to misdirect the regenerate back to the fruitless Old Testament struggle to please God by law keeping, the sole difference being that the law keeper, now regenerated, is presumably more competent to succeed where he had previously failed. Though Sproul certainly is not postulating law keeping as a means of salvation, his premise exhorts the New Testament believer to return to Old Testament activity with renewed vigor. This premise contradicts the New Testament declaration that “Christ is the end of the law unto righteousness to everyone who believes” (Rom. 10:4). Sproul’s adulation of the law oppugns the apostle’s teaching, “You are not under the law” (Gal. 5:18).

The seeking believer, having been regenerated by the Spirit, should focus his attention on walking by the Spirit (5:16). The law keeping advocated by Sproul involves the self-effort of the flesh, thus guaranteeing its failure. Through Christ’s death on the cross we “have been made dead to the law” (Rom. 7:4), “discharged from the law” (v. 6), and “joined to another, to Him” (v. 4). Sproul’s comments embrangle the old with the new. He seems convinced that the Christian has been made alive in order to live a law keeping life, but the apostle Paul disagrees: “For I through law have died to law that I might live to God” (Gal. 2:19).

Why is Christ the end of the law “to everyone who believes” (Rom. 10:4)? The answer is found in Galatians 3:21: “For if a law had been given which was able to give life, righteousness would have indeed been of law.” Christ gives the divine life which the law was not able to do. It is Christ as the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45b) who excites our soul. It is Christ as our life (Col. 3:4) who incites and propels. Does this mean that we are free to live lawlessly? On the contrary, we are commended to a higher law—the law of the Spirit

of life (Rom. 8:2). The deeds of the flesh are to be crucified, although not by law keeping’s self-effort, even if reinvigorated by our new birth. Romans 8:13 points the way: “If *by the Spirit* you put to death the practices of the body, *you will live*.”

Sproul quotes Calvin in support of his sentiments toward the law. Yet, in the passage he chooses, Calvin states, “The Law acts like a whip to the flesh, urging it on as men do a lazy sluggish ass...pricking him forward” (114). Calvin hardly romanticizes the law. Sproul admits that “certain aspects of the Law were abrogated” (107), but proceeds to aver that the law can propel us and become “a means of grace for the believer” (114). Not only is this concept foreign to Scripture; it also fixes an unscriptural and impassable obstacle before the believer in his pursuit of God. “Grace...came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17), not by certain aspects of the law. In fact, if we keep part of the law, we become “a debtor to do the whole law” (Gal. 5:3). The Christian’s quest for God focuses on Christ Himself, not on law keeping. Christ, not law, is the unique means of grace to the believer.

Misaiming concerning Asceticism

Misaiming: “The essence of the ascetic life is precisely denying oneself for Christ’s sake and taking up one’s cross to follow Him...it is ascetic through and through and all Christians—monastic, clergy, and laity—have the same path...its essence, according to Saint Theophan, is a ‘perpetual labor of conquering passions and uprooting them in order that one may preserve oneself before the face of God in a pure and immaculate state.’...The key to non-monastic asceticism is this: to strive without ceasing, *according to one’s ability*, trusting in God...” (*Again*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 18-19).

Truth: Asceticism is the practice of extreme self-denial for the purpose of gaining religious advantage. It is accurately portrayed here as an unrelenting struggle in order to “preserve oneself...in a pure and immaculate state,” a striving “without ceasing, *according to one’s ability*.” Herein lies the misaiming: Asceticism is, by definition, the effort of the self and, as such, builds up the self, which can never become pure and immaculate.

Asceticism is a counterfeit of the genuine self-denial revealed in the New Testament. The crucial question is

not whether self-denial should be practiced, but “how.” Asceticism points the earnest seeker to his own ability, while Scripture directs him to the Spirit. The Bible also condemns asceticism. In Colossians 2:20-23 Paul denounces such religious regulations as “the elements of the world” and pointedly asks the believers, “Why...do you subject yourselves to ordinances: Do not handle, nor taste, nor touch?” (vv. 20-21). Paul further asserts that self-imposed worship and lowliness and severe treatment of the body have no value against the flesh, but instead serve only to enhance the reputation of the ascetic (v. 23).

Christ unquestionably imposes a responsibility on His followers to deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow Him (Luke 9:23). However, this must be accompanied and interpreted by the subsequent Epistles. On the one hand, Romans 6:6 and Galatians 2:20 reveal that the old man and the “I” were crucified with Christ. On the other hand, Galatians 5:24 declares that “they who are of Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and its lusts,” indicating our need to cooperate with Christ’s terminating work by putting to death the old nature’s expression in our daily living. These two principles appear paradoxical: Does Christ crucify, or do we? Romans 8:13 explains, “If by the Spirit you put to death the practices of the body, you will live.” Crucifying the flesh is not by self-effort and “perpetual labor” but by our participation in the indwelling Spirit. Real self-denial takes place when the believer turns to the Spirit and lives by Him. “Walk by the Spirit and you shall by no means fulfill the lust of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16). It is the walk according to the Spirit that nullifies the lusts of the flesh, not the severe treatment of the body. It is by taking Christ as our life (Col. 3:4) that we are empowered to “put to death therefore [our] members which are on the earth” (v. 5). It is by walking and being led by the Spirit that the fruit of the Spirit, such as self-control, is borne. Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit, rather than the Spirit being a fruit of self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). It is only while minding the Spirit of life that we are able to spontaneously fulfill the law’s righteous requirement and be freed from the law of sin and death (Rom. 8:2-4).

The revelation of the New Testament condemns asceticism while encouraging genuine self-denial, which is nothing more or less than minding the Spirit in order to live and walk by Him. Daily choosing to live by Christ is the actual denial of the self. Hence, asceticism is not only unnecessary; it is a counterfeit of a believer’s genuine walk according to the Spirit of life.

Misaiming concerning Monasticism

Misaiming: “There is an axiom in the Orthodox Church, borne out by history, that says, ‘As goes monasticism, so

goes the Church.’ The health of monasticism is a barometer of the health of the Church” (*Again*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 17).

Truth: While monasticism was found before the time of Christ among pagan religions and Jewish sects, it does not appear in church history until the latter third century. Though clearly influenced by pagan and Jewish precursors, Christian monasticism more likely was a response to the delay of Christ’s second coming, in combination with the ascetic impulse prevalent in contemporary society. Monasticism began to gain acceptance during Constantine’s reign as the secular world fully infiltrated the church. With the decline of persecutions and the increased worldliness of the church, it replaced martyrdom as the ultimate expression of Christian faithfulness.

The earliest church did not practice monasticism for several compelling reasons: Its source is neither scriptural nor is it found in the earliest church life established by the apostles. The practice of cloistering believers is never encouraged in Scripture. In fact, its governing principles are patently negated in the Bible. Christ never called His followers to sequester themselves from the world. In Matthew 13:38 Christ designates Christians as “the good seed” which are sown into the field—the world—not the secluding walls of a monastery. The Lord Jesus never promised His believers an escape from society and its persecutions. Rather, in John 16:33 He offers His peace while we live in it. In fact, our Lord asked specifically that we would be left *in* the world, yet *out* of our adversary’s hands (17:15). Furthermore, not only are we to be left *in* the world; we also have been sent *into* the world as the Father sent the Son (v. 18). Lest we think that this prayer applied solely to the original twelve disciples, the Lord continued, “And I do not ask concerning these only, but concerning those also who believe into Me through their word” (v. 20). Believers are left in the world, even sent into the world, so that others may believe through their manifest testimony. Segregating and isolating earnest Christians from society drastically reduces, if not eliminates, their effectiveness and influence on the unconverted.

The Lord’s great commission to the believers in Matthew 28:19-20 is, “Go therefore and disciple all the nations...teaching them.” The force of the Lord’s sentiment is further felt in Luke 10:2: “Beseech the Lord of the harvest that He would thrust out workers into His harvest.” The Lord would “thrust [us] out,” not close us in. According to the Bible, then, the health of the church should be measured by the church’s ability to live *in* the world with divine impact and yet not be *of* the world. The church is called to live a heavenly life on earth as an observable testimony to all men and among them. **LFC**