

M I S A I M I N G S

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

Misaiming concerning Christian Growth

Misaiming: “For us, too, there is a maker’s handbook—namely, God’s summary of the way to live that we find in the Ten Commandments. Whether as persons we grow and blossom or shrink and wither, whether in character we become more like God or more like the devil, depends directly on whether we seek to live by what is in the Commandments or not. The rest of the Bible could be called God’s repair manual, since it spells out the gospel of grace that restores sin-damaged human nature, but it is the Commandments that crystallize the basic behavior-pattern which brings satisfaction and contentment, and it is precisely for this way of living that God’s grace rescues and refits us” (J. I. Packer, *Growing in Christ*, 1994, p. 221).

Truth: This statement errs in three respects. First, we are told that the Ten Commandments are “God’s summary of the way to live” and that we should “seek to live by what is in the Commandments.” The New Testament, however, instructs otherwise. The Lord’s own speaking in His unveiling of the kingdom life in Matthew 5—7 makes it clear that the New Testament has elevated the Christian’s living to a standard far surpassing that required of the Old Testament Israelite. In fact, so high is the New Testament standard that the Lord’s description of the kingdom life in these chapters consummates in His charge: “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (v. 48). This lofty command should compel any serious seeker to cast himself utterly on the “power of an indestructible life”—the divine life (Heb. 7:16)—rather than relying on impotent human efforts to keep the Ten Commandments. These three chapters in Matthew provide a summary of God’s New Testament requirements, spelling out God’s intention to express Himself in full through His kingdom of matured believers. While the Ten Commandments reveal certain aspects of the Lawgiver, they hardly approach the glorious standard which God expects from the growth of His divine life within the believers—“that we would be to the praise of His glory” (Eph. 1:12). God’s expression, His glory, is the standard of Christian growth and living, and in order to reach this goal, believers must seek to live by Christ (John 6:57), not by the law.

This statement further errs in maintaining that Christian

growth is simply an improved “behavior-pattern” modeled on the Ten Commandments. Based on the flawed premise that the Old Testament commandments are the standard for Christian living, this passage misguidedly concludes that a law-based living *is* Christian growth. Nonetheless, the truest definition of genuine growth is found in Colossians 2:19: the Body of Christ “grows with *the growth of God*.” Genuine Christian growth is not merely an improved ethical living; it must be the increase of God Himself within the believer.

The third major flaw in the passage is its view of the rest of the Bible as God’s “repair manual.” This concept falls far short of God’s glorious intention for man. Even if Adam had never fallen, never sinned, he still would have fallen short of fulfilling God’s purpose because he had not yet partaken of God as the tree of life. Sinless, undamaged Adam still needed God’s life. The undamaged Adam was like a perfect, empty glove, lacking the hand in whose image and for whose expression it was made. God’s intention with man is not merely to “rescue and refit” him, but even the more, to recover his right to the tree of life (Rev. 22:14). The blood of the Lamb washes our robes, which qualifies us to partake of God’s life, and the growth of this divine life and nature within us gradually transforms us into His image. This is much loftier than a commandment-based behavior pattern eked out by a repaired yet untransformed, unglorified humanity.

Misaiming concerning the Force of the New Covenant

Misaiming: “The Scriptures stress that God does not have to forgive. His exercise of mercy is discretionary or optional. God’s forgiveness is, thus, not a right. It may not be presumed upon” (Ligon Duncan, “Accounting for Sin,” *Tabletalk*, Feb. 1998, p. 54).

Truth: This statement disregards the legally binding authority of the new covenant, apparently confusing the distinction between a covenant and a promise. Hebrews 8:6 speaks of both God’s promise and His covenant. It tells us that Christ as our High Priest is now “the Mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted upon better promises.” What is the difference between a promise and a covenant? It is the addition of an oath, as spoken of in Hebrews 7:21. God’s promises together

with His oath forged a new covenant, a legally binding contract, guaranteed by Christ Himself as our surety (v. 22). While God is almighty and can do as He pleases, showing mercy on whom He wills, He has chosen nonetheless to bind Himself to His promise by an oath, which resulted in an obligatory covenant—not a “discretionary or optional” exercise of mercy.

Based upon Christ’s wonderful redemptive work on the cross, God has covenantally bound Himself to faithfully and righteously “forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). God has made an irrevocable contract with His children, proclaiming, “I will be propitious to their unrighteousnesses, and their sins I shall by no means remember anymore” (Heb. 8:12). Whenever a sinner confesses faith in Christ, God is bound by His own legal contract to forgive and cleanse him. This right to God’s forgiveness has nothing to do with human presumption and everything to do with our almighty, omnipotent God willingly binding Himself by promise and oath (i.e., covenant) to forgive repentant sinners. This steadfast new covenant firmly assures all believers of their eternal salvation and also silences the accusations of the evil one.

Misaiming concerning the Process of the Triune God

Misaiming: “When we speak about *being*, we are speaking about something that *is*. And for it to *be* in an ultimate sense, it cannot be going through a process of change. It has to be in a state of *being*, rather than a state of *becoming*. That which is in a state of *becoming* is always in transition, it is always changing, therefore is not perfect. But God, the source of all existence, must be in a state of *being*...There is no process within the character or being of God” (“Our Unchanging God,” *Tabletalk*, Jan. 1998, p. 40).

Truth: This quotation errs in presuming that anything which “is in a state of *becoming*...is not perfect.” This assumption is no doubt based upon the fact that God in His essential attributes is immutable, unchanging. For example, God is righteous and will remain forever righteous. God is also love and will continue to exist as a loving God for eternity. In these and in a multitude of other respects, God retains His immutable character. It is wrong, though, to conclude that the terms *process* and *becoming* imply imperfection in God’s character. If this were the case, Hebrews 2:10, which says that Christ was made perfect through sufferings, would seem to point to a time when God was not perfect. But this is not the thought in Hebrews 2:10. Christ was an absolutely perfect God-man who lived a faultless, sinless life. In both His divine attributes and human virtues He was flawless. However, Christ had to undergo the perfecting process of human suffering: Each of the temptations

and trials through which He passed was necessary in order to perfect His human experience by completing it. The element of human suffering needed to be added to the experience of this sinless God-man in order for Him to be fully qualified to save us to the uttermost (7:25). Prior to passing through the human living of the incarnated Christ, the eternal God had never partaken of human sufferings; therefore, it was in this sense that He needed to be perfected.

The New Testament reveals a definite and crucial “process” through which the Triune God passed. In addition to the perfecting accomplished by Christ’s human sufferings, the Bible tells us that the eternal Word *became* flesh by means of incarnation (John 1:14). Throughout eternity God will retain this human nature, including even the physical human body which He obtained by means of the process of incarnation (Acts 7:56; 1 Tim. 2:5). Furthermore, the Bible tells us that Christ as the last Adam also *became* a life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45) so that now “the Lord is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:17). Quite mysteriously, as a result of this process, even as Christ exists in bodily form, He is identified as the Spirit. It is because God in Christ *became* a man that He is qualified to be our Redeemer. It is because Christ was perfected through His human sufferings that He is qualified to save us to the uttermost. It is because He *became* the life-giving Spirit that He is able to reach us and indwell us with the saving divine life of God. Thus, the Lord’s marvelous “process” of incarnation, human living, crucifixion, burial, resurrection, ascension, and enthronement by no means indicates the slightest imperfection in God’s essential character; rather, its enrichment through the addition of His human virtues and His present pneumatic availability.

Misaiming concerning the Participants at the Wedding Feast

Misaiming: “But Israel will receive and accept another invitation in the future, and all of the redeemed will sit down at a great banquet called the ‘wedding supper of the Lamb’ (Rev. 19:9)” (*Today in the Word*, Dec. 1997, p. 20).

Truth: The wedding supper of the Lamb referenced above is the same event mentioned in Matthew 22:1-14. In this parable, the Lord reveals that the Jews were invited to His wedding feast yet failed to respond to the invitation, prompting His disciples to go to the Gentiles instead. This feast is also mentioned in Matthew 25:1-13, where the Lord forbids the foolish virgins and admits only the prudent virgins. According to 2 Corinthians 11:2, all the believers in Christ are virgins espoused to Him. But the prudent virgins admitted to the feast in Matthew 25 are overcoming believers who throughout their life have been filled with the Holy

Spirit, signified by the oil, within their souls, signified by vessels. Hence, the marriage feast of the Lamb is a reward offered by Christ to these overcoming believers; they alone are qualified to participate in it. It is not to be confused with the free gift of eternal life (Rom. 6:23), which will be offered to repentant Israel when Christ comes “with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the land will mourn over Him” (Rev. 1:7). When the Israelites who survive the great tribulation see Christ descend, they will surely repent. But this repentance unto initial salvation is distinct from participation in the wedding awarded to those overcoming believers who have lived faithfully for Christ, ever yielding to His life-long transforming work within them.

Misaiming concerning Presenting the Gospel

Misaiming: “Again: we have to ask, is this way of presenting Christ calculated to convey to people the *application* of the gospel, and not just part of it, but the whole of it—the summons to see and know oneself as God sees and knows one, that is, as a sinful creature, and to face the breadth and depth of the need into which a wrong relationship with God has brought one, and to face too the cost and consequences of turning to receive Christ as Saviour and Lord? Or is it likely to be deficient here, and to gloss over some of this, and to give an inadequate, distorted impression of what the gospel requires? Will it, for instance, leave people unaware that they have any immediate obligation to respond to Christ at all? Or will it leave them supposing that all they have to do is to trust Christ as a sin-bearer, not realizing that they must also deny themselves and enthrone Him as their Lord (the error which we might call only-believism)? (J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, 1961, pp. 88-89).

Truth: This view does a damaging disservice to both unbelievers and believers in complicating and overstating the gospel’s requirements for initial salvation. This quotation suggests that sinners must be presented with the “cost and consequences of turning to receive Christ.” It appends to the gospel message a condition beyond simply trusting in Christ, that is, the additional condition that sinners simultaneously must be presented with their need to “deny themselves and enthrone” Christ. Telling sinners that they can be saved by repentance and faith in Christ alone is dismissed as “deficient,” “inadequate,” and “distorted,” the error of “only-believism.”

If this is so, then the apostle Paul himself was guilty of “only-believism.” When the Philippian jailer cried, “What must I do to be saved?” Paul and Silas responded simply, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved” (Acts 16:30-31). While the apostles undoubtedly

presented the gospel in detail at the jailer’s house (v. 32), the hearers were initially required only to “believe.” It is not a commitment to future good works that secures our salvation. We are “saved through faith, and this not of yourselves; it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8). This approach complicates the presentation of the New Testament gospel with a need to present “the cost and consequences” of becoming a believer, denying the self, and living the kingdom life. But eternal life is the free gift of God (Rom. 6:23) and as such cannot be earned by the sinner’s commitment to future good works. Regeneration is the receiving of the divine, eternal life that initiates the transformation process in the new believer. An unbeliever with an unrenewed mind scarcely can be expected to accurately assess what it means to live Christ as a Christian, much less vow to do so. Certainly an unbeliever needs to realize his lost, sinful condition as well as the Father’s gracious provision of a Savior, but to present a requirement of future consecration before he has received the divine life which alone can enable him to live a consecrated Christian life is premature and potentially stumbling. Our evangelism should reflect faithfully the gospel, which clearly distinguishes the kingdom *reward* for the overcoming believer from the free *gift* of eternal life for the believing, repentant sinner. To the *unbeliever*, we stress repentant believing. To the *new* believer, we stress the growth of the divine life so that he might become an overcomer.

Finally, this formulaic view of presenting the gospel ignores the simple testimony of the New Testament, in which many of the most effective presenters of the gospel were those who had just received the gospel themselves. The woman at the well, knowing only of the Lord’s promise to give Himself as living water to satisfy her desperate seeking for meaning, believed, was satisfied, and immediately began to proclaim the wonders of her Savior. Her subsequent gospel message to the residents of her city was simply, “Come, see a man who told me all that I have done. Is this not the Christ?” (John 4:29). And the residents of the city came, not because she was able to formulaically present the prerequisites of Christian growth and maturity and then obtain their assent to follow these tenets, but because of her living testimony. There are many ways to present the gospel; it is a seed that every believer should willingly, lovingly, and unsparingly scatter. The consecration and reverence to Christ that the author wishes to present as a hurdle to receiving the Lord surely will come as the life seed develops within new believers, especially as they are nourished up by the pure milk of the word and as they are rooted and grounded with other believers in the fellowship of the divine life.

by the Editors