

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

July 1979

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The Christ of History or the Christ of Experience?

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"For the time will come when they will not endure the sound doctrine; but, having itching ears, will heap to them selves teachers after their own lusts; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and turn aside unto fables" (2 *Timothy* 4:3, 4).

In the fourth chapter of 2 *Timothy*, the apostle Paul explicitly commands the young minister to preach and teach the word of God at all times. Timothy must teach, reprove, and rebuke according to the "sound doctrine" of the "sacred writings" which he had known from childhood. The apostle warns Timothy of false teachers and wicked imposters who will turn away from the sound doctrines of Scripture and substitute lies and fables. In verse 5, Timothy is commanded to stand firm, be sober and abide in his work as an evangelist. In verses 2-5, the important point to observe is that Paul defines evangelism as the presentation of God's "word" or "truth" or "sound doctrine." Hence any minister who adds or subtracts from the sound doctrine of Scripture cannot claim the Biblical title of an evangelist. Paul uses the terms "word," "truth," and "sound doctrine" synonymously. Apostolic evangelism clearly meant the exposition of doctrine as the foundation of life. Biblical truth always came before and was the foundation of human conduct. The faithful evangelist principally teaches *what* man is to believe concerning God as the foundation of what duty God requires of man. Belief or faith in God is mentally fixed upon objective, Biblical doctrine or the propositional truths of written revelation.

In the twentieth century, Christianity has virtually rejected the scriptural idea of Biblical doctrine as the foundation of life. Due to the nineteenth-century influence of Schleiermacher's modernism and Karl Barth's contemporary neo-orthodoxy, modern Christians have replaced written revelation and sound doctrine with human experience. In the words of the late J. Gresham Machen:

Today the order is commonly reversed. Life comes first, we are told, and doctrine comes afterwards. Religion is first an experience and only secondarily a doctrine. Doctrine is merely an expression of religious experience...doctrinal expression must change as the generations pass (*The Christian Faith in the Modern World*).

This common attitude is simply the denial of absolute truth or God. It seeks to establish human experience as the foundation of relative "truth" in place of God's word as the foundation of eternal, absolute truth. This is humanism, or the innate, evil claim of man to be his own god over the God of eternal truth.

In consequence, modern Christianity has adopted a humanistic or man-centered concept of evangelism. One typical example is found in the February 28, 1979 issue of *The Presbyterian Journal*, a magazine which seeks to "promote a rising reformation in God's Church according to the whole counsel of God known as the Reformed faith;..." The article is

entitled "Close Encounters of the God Kind" by Mr. Leighton Ford, associate evangelist with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. According to Mr. Ford, the essential goal of man is to have a "close encounter with the true and living God." The nature of this encounter is a human experience or "encounter" with Jesus. Mr. Ford compares an encounter with Jesus to an encounter with an extraterrestrial being in the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

But a close encounter of the third kind is a personal, first-hand experience with a UFO. Have you ever thought that Christianity involves a close encounter of the God kind? Christianity involves a personal, close encounter with the true and living God.

Later on, Ford continues to clarify his definition of the encounter experience by quoting from the *United Methodist Reporter*:

And then the day arrives when we experience the friendship of the Master in that marvelous personal encounter we call "conversion." And thus we come to share in life's most complete and joyous experience: we join the joyous company of those who've known the thrill of close encounters of the third kind!

Earlier Machen was quoted to verify the trend of modern evangelism to reverse the Biblical order of doctrine before life. Today the warm, vital experience of life must always precede dry, Christian doctrine. This unscriptural idea appears throughout Ford's article.

Knowing God involves a close encounter. It means more than believing in far-off power. It means more than knowing about God. It's a close encounter that transforms life.

We may again observe that Ford emphasizes and defines a personal relationship with God as a transforming encounter or experience in a man's life. Of course, it is biblically true that a personal relationship with God is an experience in a man's

life, although it is extremely doubtful that regeneration is ever consciously experienced. However, Mr. Ford goes beyond Scripture by asserting this relationship or transforming experience as more important than simply be living or knowing God by theological doctrine. It is now a question of which authority warrants faith, God's word or a "transforming experience."

Mr. Ford says that to *know* God means "more than be living"; the "more" must be a "close encounter" or religious experience. Now, one wonders how Mr. Ford can shamelessly claim the Biblical title of an evangelist by adding unscriptural requirements to Paul's doctrine of faith alone. How can Mr. Ford boldly assert something *more* than, or perhaps beyond, belief when Paul and Silas command the repentant jailer: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved..."? Did the apostle John require something *more* than belief when he said, "He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in him: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he hath not believed in the witness that God hath borne concerning his Son. And the witness is this, that God gave unto us eternal life, and this life is in his Son" (*1 John* 5:10—11)? For John, the gift of eternal life was received through intellectual assent to the objective, historical word. The apostle clearly places the gift of eternal life in the Son (*Logos*, Word or Reason of God). "These things have I written unto you, that ye may know that ye have eternal life, even unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God" (*1 John* 5:13) We can now clearly see that all warrant for faith or belief in Christ rests completely on God's power in his written revelation.

In contrast to John's teaching, Mr. Ford's doctrine of faith goes far beyond mental assent to the doctrines or words of Christ: "But Jesus Christ is more than ancient history. Life begins when you discover the dimensions of a present, personal relationship [human experience] with Him as Saviour and Lord." Here Ford depreciates history and explicitly places the significance of human experience above the *authority* of written revelation. But did not Christ strongly assert "the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (*John* 6:63)? It is of great importance for Christians

to realize that Christ always identified the divine authority of his spoken words with the divine authority of the written words of the Old Testament. In *John 5:47*, the Pharisees, like Leighton Ford, also disparaged the "ancient history" of Moses' written word.

The brilliant Calvinist theologian and minister, Dr. Gordon H. Clark, has carefully exegeted *John 5:47*:

...*John 5:47* is one of the most important [references] on the authority of words, both written and spoken. After healing the lame man at the pool of Bethesda, directing him to pick up his rug and walk, and at the climax of the ensuing confrontation with the Pharisees, Jesus (in a stern and awe some voice) exclaims, "Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses in whom you have put your hope. For if you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how can you believe my words!"

Here Moses appears as an accuser, naturally a legitimate accuser with a legitimate accusation—so much so that Christ himself need not accuse the unbelieving Pharisees. They had refused to believe what Moses had written. Of course, Moses had written words on parchment. These words receive the full approbation of Christ. Thus Christ attributes to Moses' written words the full divine authority of truth. Because the Pharisees do not believe Moses' written words, they cannot believe Christ's spoken words. These words, these *rheemata*, are (in part), "the Son makes those alive whom He wants to...the Father has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father... Indeed I tell you that whoever hears my *logos* and believes him who sent me has eternal life" (*John 5:21—23*). In these earlier verses the message of Christ is a *logos*; at the end of the chapter this same message is called *rheemata*. *Logos* and *rheema* designate the same thing (*The Johannine Logos*).

We have observed that the Pharisees asserted their "living" authority over Moses' historical words,

which prevented them from believing Christ's spoken words. Does Leighton Ford's disparagement of "ancient history" prevent him from believing the written Word?

In conclusion, we must ask what kind of Christ Leighton Ford offers us. Is he the Christ of "ancient history" spoken of in the Bible, or is he the false Christ of emotional experience? "Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not [the historical] Jesus . . . is not of God: and this is the spirit of the anti-Christ (*1 John 4:2, 3*).