

BIBLICAL ECONOMICS TODAY

Vol. XV, No. 4

©Gary North, 1993

June/July 1993

LEADERSHIP AND DISCIPLESHIP

Part 4: Scarecrow Theology

by Gary North

And call ye on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the LORD: and the God that answereth by fire, let him be God. And all the people answered and said, It is well spoken (1 Kings 18:24).

And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell (Matt. 10:28).

God answers covenantal rebellion with fire. Covenant-breakers rarely admit this fact, and covenant-keepers prefer not to think about it. This makes covenant keepers a poor match for covenant-breakers in history. Christians are so afraid of offending covenant-breakers that they keep silent regarding God's fire. They are afraid that covenant-keepers hold the hottest torches in history. I call this scarecrow theology.

In the movie version of "The Wizard of Oz," Dorothy meets three companions along the yellow brick road: the scarecrow, the tin man, and the lion. The only thing that saved them in the end from total irrelevance and personal failure was their willingness to fight when the forces of evil threatened someone they loved. Seldom have three fantasy characters better fit the description of the modern church. The scarecrow had no brain, and was terrified of fire: a fundamentalist. The tin man had no heart, and every time it rained, he became frozen stiff with rust: a Calvinist. The lion was a coward, yet he had a powerful appearance and a roar that kept getting him into dangerous situations: a European state church, best characterized by Eastern Orthodoxy. The theology of Christianity is scarecrow theology: the denial of God's predictable corporate sanctions in history.

A Question of Historical Sanctions

Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 teach clearly that God brings corporate sanctions in history: positive (the shorter list in each chapter) and negative. God announced Himself publicly to the Israelites by delivering them from bondage in Egypt: positive corporate sanctions for Israel, negative corporate sanctions for Egypt. The Ten Commandments begin with this statement: "I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Ex. 20:2). The defining characteristic of God under the Mosaic Covenant was His power over history, as demonstrated by His deliverance of His people from bondage. God is the sanctions-bringer in history.

In the New Covenant, the defining characteristic of God is His deliverance of His people from eternal punishment: the

transition from death to life. This transition takes place in history. "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him" (John 3:36). "We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death" (1 John 3:14).

It would be a terrible error to conclude that under the Mosaic Covenant, covenant-keepers were not heirs of eternal life. Every evangelical Christian acknowledges this. But it would be an equally terrible error to conclude that under the New Covenant, God does not bring corporate sanctions in terms of men's response to His revealed law. Yet virtually all evangelical Christians today deny that God does this in the New Covenant era. This is scarecrow theology.

God brings sanctions in history because He brings them in eternity. Under the Old Covenant, God manifested Himself as the bringer of judicially predictable sanctions in history. There was no developed theology of eternal sanctions in the Old Testament. Under the New Covenant, in contrast, God manifests Himself in His written word. But there is no New Testament revelation that God is not the bringer of sanctions in history.

The main difference in the two covenants with respect to historical sanctions is that individual prophets no longer bring individual sanctions. Why not? Because of the closing of revelation and the completion of the Bible. There is no judicially authoritative divine revelation given to men in the post-A.D. 70 era. So, situations are quite rare in which individual sanctions predictably follow the verbal announcement of a Christian, usually confined to unique missions activities in pagan societies in which demonic magic is widespread. The power of the completed Bible is so great that the church's need for prophetically predictable individual sanctions as covenantal testimonies is drastically reduced. One major exception to this rule is bodily healing (James 5:14), but modern churches rarely resort to this God-ordained practice, so committed are they to scarecrow theology.

Are we to conclude that just because God no longer uses prophets to bring individual sanctions, His corporate sanctions are no longer operable in this dispensation? No more than we are to conclude that His eternal sanctions did not apply under the Old Covenant just because corporate and individual sanctions were publicly manifested.

To understand God's sanctions in history, we must first understand His sanctions in eternity. To understand who Jesus Christ is in history, we must understand His role as sanctions-bringer in eternity. Because modern Christians have

adopted scarecrow theology, they have failed to understand Jesus Christ as sanctions-bringer, and His church as sanctions-bringer.

Jesus: The Cosmic Terrorist

God is not barbaric. Rather, God is the cosmic torturer. If the word "torture" sounds too harsh to you in this context, you have not given sufficient thought to the New Testament doctrine of eternal torment. The New Testament Greek word for torment can also be translated as torture. We must not get barbarism and eternal torture confused. Barbarism is man's attempt to replace God in bringing eternal sanctions. Covenant-breaking man imitates God by torturing other men.

God sends people to hell temporarily. Hell is really not so bad when compared to the lake of fire. Men do not have resurrected bodies in hell. Also, they can still communicate, according to the parable of Dives and Lazarus (Luke 16:23-31). At the final judgment, God will resurrect all men's bodies and join their bodies with their souls. Then He will separate the sheep from the goats in two corporate groups (Matt. 25). The sheep will enjoy bliss forever; the goats will experience pain forever. After the final judgment, God will dump the contents of hell into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14-15). Those perfect, death-free bodies of the lost will suffer perfect agony for all eternity. Those eternally tortured men and women will no doubt long for annihilation, but they will never be granted such immeasurable grace. For all eternity, they will be tortured. When God resurrects souls from hell, He in effect announces to His enemies: "No more Mr. Nice Guy."

The language of torture is found in Jesus' parable of the unjust steward: "And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors [torturers], till he should pay all that was due unto him. So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses" (Matt. 18:34-35).

Let us not downplay God's holy office as cosmic torturer. This is torture, not rehabilitation. The fires of the Mosaic altar were representative of this final judgment. The odor of the burning flesh of animals was representative of the sight in God's eyes of the wicked in eternity. "But his inwards and his legs shall he wash in water: and the priest shall burn all on the altar, to be a burnt sacrifice, an offering made by fire, of a sweet savour unto the LORD" (Lev. 1:9).

Christians affirm that these sacrifices were substitutes for men, but they draw back in aesthetic horror when anyone suggests that they go all the way with their theology of final judgment. They do not acknowledge that God delights in the fires that consume His eternal enemies. That He delights in the destruction of Satan and his host they freely admit, but men? Sacred men? Creatures made in God's image? It just couldn't be true! God just couldn't delight in the symbolic scent of ever-burning human flesh. But He does. He gets exactly what He wants. He is not wracked eternally with guilt or remorse for the lost.

Fire from Above

In the Old Covenant after Noah's Flood, God manifested His authority and power through fire. The confrontation between Elijah and the false prophets is representative: "And call ye on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the LORD: and the God that answereth by fire, let him be God. And all the people answered and said, It is well spoken" (I Kings 18:24).

The prophet brought God's covenant lawsuit in terms of God's revealed law, but the truth of this lawsuit was to be acknowledged by men in terms of their own consciences, not their fear of visible sanctions in history. The mark of spiritual maturity is one's reliance on a combination of God's visible

written revelation and one's invisible conscience, not God's visible historical sanctions and one's invisible fear of such sanctions. This is not to say that we are not to fear God's sanctions; we are. **We are to fear God's future sanctions, which are not visible to us today.** "And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28).

The sanction by which God authoritatively manifested Himself most often under the Mosaic covenant was fire. "And Elijah answered and said to the captain of fifty, If I be a man of God, then let fire come down from heaven, and consume thee and thy fifty. And there came down fire from heaven, and consumed him and his fifty" (II Kings 1:10). This happened to a second troop of fifty sent by the king to arrest Elijah (II Kings 1:11-12). Then a third troop was sent by the king. The captain of this troop, however, had understood the message conveyed by fire. He pleaded for mercy (II Kings 1:13-15).

This was the Old Covenant's fire from above. Simple men understood it. They sometimes even responded in obedience to it, at least temporarily. But a greater fire lies ahead of us of which Old Covenant men knew little or nothing. The twin doctrines of hell and the lake of fire were not articulated in the Old Testament. It was only with the coming of Jesus Christ that the developed doctrines of the soul's existence in hell and the resurrected man's eternal existence in the lake of fire first appeared: **fire down below**. This is the big-time fire, not some wimpy fire from heaven that consumes men's bodies in an instant or two and is over. The visible fires from above were mere representations in history of the outrage of God through eternity.

Fire Down Below

The church's priesthood no longer tends fires. Its prophets no longer have the authority or power to call down fire on God's enemies. Centuries before the fire of the altar went out in A.D. 70, God had ceased to manifest Himself through fire. **When He ceased to send prophets, He ceased to send fire.** The church today therefore appears to be devoid of meaningful negative sanctions in history. But the church possesses what should be the most terrifying of all sanctions in history: the authority, recognized and enforced by God, of condemning men to eternal judgment.

While this condemnation is historical, covenantal, and therefore conditional, it is nevertheless real. Men are condemned publicly by the church in order that they might repent in history (I Cor. 5:5). But if they do not repent, the church's formal condemnation is what condemns them in God's heavenly court. "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16:18-19).

This is not an exclusively Roman Catholic doctrine. John Calvin wrote of this passage that "this applies to the discipline of excommunication which is entrusted to the church. But the church binds him whom it excommunicates – not that it casts him into everlasting ruin and despair, but because it condemns his life and morals, and already warns him of his condemnation unless he should repent. . . . Therefore, that no one may stubbornly despise the judgment of the church, or think it immaterial that he has been condemned by the vote of the believers, the Lord testifies that such judgment by believers is nothing but the proclamation of his own sentence, and that whatever they have done on earth is ratified in heaven." (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*)

(1559), IV:XI:2. Edited by Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960], I, p. 1214.)

The Old Covenant did not mention the lake of fire. God terrorized rebels into submission through visible fire. In the New Covenant, God terrorizes rebels by the doctrine of eternal torment. **God is a cosmic terrorist.** He tortures His enemies without mercy forever. He places their perfect resurrected bodies, capable of bearing exquisite agony, into fire forever. As Otto Scott has said, **God is no buttercup.**

Modern Christians rarely have heard an imprecatory psalm prayed from the pulpit against some covenant-breaker. They have never heard psalm 83 read officially from the pulpit against specific individuals.

O my God, make them like a wheel; as the stubble before the wind. As the fire burneth a wood, and as the flame setteth the mountains on fire; So persecute them with thy tempest, and make them afraid with thy storm. Fill their faces with shame; that they may seek thy name, O LORD. Let them be confounded and troubled for ever; yea, let them be put to shame, and perish; That men may know that thou, whose name alone is JEHOVAH, art the most high over all the earth (Ps. 82:13-18).

If any pastor would dare to pray such things, he would lose many church members. They would transfer to other less controversial congregations. Why? Because these Christians regard the God of the Old Covenant as the theological equivalent of a fairy tale beginning with "Once upon a time." They want no part of such a God. They prefer a God who brings only negative sanctions beyond history. Such a God supposedly does not call his ordained priests and magistrates to enforce His written law and its mandatory sanctions. They prefer to live under the rule of covenant-breakers who do not call God's people to obey God's word. They stand side by side the covenant-breakers and yell: "We're under grace, not law!" In fact, **Christians are under pagan lawyers and pagan law codes.** They prefer it this way. They do not want to be under God, under God's law, under God's institutional sanctions, and over history. Like the Israelites of Moses' day, they prefer life in Egypt to life in the wilderness, and life in the wilderness to life in Canaan.

Nagging for Jesus

God no longer entrusts the visible prophetic fire of heaven to His church. Instead, He entrusts to the church the invisible fire of eternity: excommunication. Rather than bringing visible fire along with God's covenant lawsuit, the New Covenant priest is authorized to bring the message of God's sanctions to come: corporate sanctions in history and personal sanctions in eternity.

Most Christians do not believe in these corporate historical sanctions. They do not believe that God brings corporate judgment against His enemies in history, at least not before the so-called secret Rapture. (Half a billion people disappear into the clouds: some secret!) They believe in personal sanctions in eternity – heaven and hell – but not corporate sanctions in history. If there are corporate sanctions in history, then Christians are required to pressure every society to obey God's revealed law – His still, small voice in the Bible. They reject all such suggestions regarding this additional covenantal responsibility. They preach, at most, the invisible fire of eternity.

If God does not bring corporate sanctions in history, Christians conclude, then God's anointed officers should not announce or bring judicial sanctions in history in God's name. People should not be excommunicated; imprecatory

psalms should not be prayed against specific evil-doers; and the listed capital crimes of the Mosaic law should not receive the death penalty, except (possibly) murder. In short, God's civil law should not be preached today, we are assured, and God's negative civil sanctions should not be imposed. No biblical sanctions!

Then what is modern preaching? **Nagging.** Preaching becomes the equivalent of the nagging mother who keeps telling her misbehaving child, "I'll tell your father when he gets home." The child, a present-oriented little monster, only increases his rebellion. "If you don't stop, I'll spank you," repeatedly announces his mother, who does not believe in spanking. "In a pig's eye," the three-year-old responds, if not in thought, then in action.

Preaching always reflects the church's view of God's sovereignty, man's representative authority, law, sanctions, and time: the five points of the biblical covenant. Modern fundamentalist preaching begins with a denial of God's absolute sovereignty, moves to a minimization of Christians' authority in history, announces neutral natural law as the only valid legal civil order, proclaims God's eternal sanctions only, and insists on the inevitable defeat of Christianity in history. In contrast (but not much), modern Calvinist preaching begins with the doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty, but on the other four points generally affirms the Arminian gospel. It may substitute amillennial defeatism for premillennial defeatism; but that is the only significant formal difference. The resulting **theology of pluralism** is the same in both theologies, except that highly educated Calvinists are somewhat more likely to adopt left wing humanist social theory than less educated Calvinists and most Arminians are. The latter prefer right wing humanist social theory.

Preaching has become an exercise in nagging. It has ceased to be the announcement of God's covenantal corporate lawsuit and its appropriate sanctions in history. The God of contemporary preaching is presented in some version of "God's gonna get you, you bad old sinner . . . but not in history." To which the bad old sinner, like the spoiled three-year-old child, responds: "In a pig's eye."

Nagging, Mercy, and Sanctions

The God of the Old Covenant flooded the whole world, drowning every person on earth except eight adults. Noah's sons were adults; so were their wives. God drowned all the babies on earth. Screaming in fear, choking to death, crying hysterically – they all died terribly, never knowing why. Not one survived. Not one was shown an ounce of mercy. God cut off the future of that generation of covenant-breakers by destroying their children before their eyes. And on the far side of death, what awaited those children was far worse than drowning. At least the water had not been boiling. God is no buttercup.

Most modern Christians deny the universal flood. They follow the liberals in arguing that Genesis 8-9 is only allegorical, not literal and therefore not historical. They do not want God's covenantally predictable negative sanctions in history, either personal or corporate. But when the doctrine of corporate historical sanctions is removed from theology, the church becomes impotent to defend itself except through civil courts that do not consciously enforce biblical law. **The church becomes a kind of institutional scarecrow.** The smarter, more aggressive crows come and sit on its head, or worse. When the cornfield of civilization is policed only by a tattered scarecrow, we can expect the crows to consume most of the crop.

What has evangelical preaching become? When it is not some version of self-help psychology, it is scarecrow theology. "God's gonna getcha after you're dead!" **This God of**

scarecrow theology is as historically impotent as the ecclesiastical scarecrow which preaches it. It is only by a unique act of faith that faithful people in the pews today can muster belief in hell and the lake of fire, and most of them prefer not to think about it. Kenneth Kantzer wrote in *Christianity Today* a few years ago that he had not heard a sermon on hell in over 25 years.

The Jesus of scarecrow theology becomes little more than a personal nag. So does the Holy Spirit. Scarecrow theology insists that God is limited in history to nagging individual consciences. Scarecrow preaching is the result. **Without historical sanctions, preaching becomes nagging.** There is fundamentalist nagging: "God's gonna getcha!" There is neo-evangelical nagging: "We must become relevant as Christians!" There is liberal nagging: "We must become citizens of the world through our mission!" (Fundamentalists are involved with missions; liberals are involved with mission.) But all of it is nagging. Without God's historical sanctions in history, what else could it be? "Wait till you father gets home!"

God through Jesus Christ shows mercy in history. That is, God postpones imposing His final negative sanctions for the sake of His elect (Matt. 13:29). I conclude that this is the reason why He also postpones His lesser negative historical sanctions. But when the doctrine of postponed historical sanctions becomes the doctrine of non-existent historical sanctions, preaching becomes nagging.

Nagging is a substitute for imposing negative sanctions, whether parents do it or preachers. God does not withhold His negative historical sanctions forever; neither should parents and preachers. Modern theology insists that God does withhold predictable negative sanctions until the second coming. This makes God into a nag. Rebels learn to dismiss nagging as irrelevant, the whining of someone without power. Here is their problem: God has a long fuse, but the explosion eventually comes. To the extent that Christians are under the authority of covenant-breakers, this is our problem, too.

Jesus as a Cosmic Nanny

The nanny has little power yet tremendous authority. She rears the children, but she receives her authority only from the parents. She rarely has the authority to punish children physically. She rules mainly by moral suasion. But if she possesses strong moral authority, she can change the lives of those under her authority. George Grant tells me that the Saud family has sent all of its inexpensive Philippine nannies back to the Philippines. They were making Christian converts out of the children.

In this sense, Jesus is a nanny. He sovereignly converts some of the children of covenant-breakers. The view of Jesus as a nanny is appropriate in the context of children. He does invite the children to sit with Him. This is why Sunday schools and Christian day care facilities are biblically legitimate: they are a means of evangelism. But nannies are hired only to rear children. They are not hired to exercise authority over adults.

The theological problem begins when adults regard Jesus as a cosmic nanny, a nanny who is not allowed to bring sanctions against anyone in history, or at least during the so-called dispensation of the Church Age. Jesus as nanny is the preferred theology of children who shout back at their

nannies: "You can't touch me. Only my father can touch me, and he's on a business trip." This was the assertion of the Jews in Jesus' day:

Hear another parable: There was a certain householder, which planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and digged a winepress in it, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country: And when the time of the fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the husbandmen, that they might receive the fruits of it. And the husbandmen took his servants, and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another. Again, he sent other servants more than the first: and they did unto them likewise. But last of all he sent unto them his son, saying, They will reverence my son. But when the husbandmen saw the son, they said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance. And they caught him, and cast him out of the vineyard, and slew him. When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen? They say unto him, He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons (Matt. 21:33-41).

This promised judgment was not delayed to eternity. It came upon Israel in A.D. 70. Jesus is no nanny when He deals with adult rebels. **The mark of His non-nanny status is His willingness to bring corporate negative sanctions in history.**

But modern preaching denies that Jesus will bring predictable corporate sanctions in history: Jesus as a cosmic nanny. He brings lollipops (sugarless, of course) for good little girls and boys, but never a spanking for bad ones. If it were up to modern evangelists, God would have instructed Moses to bring this message to Pharaoh: "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life."

Conclusion

Christians cannot lead today because their theology denies the theological foundation of Christian leadership: the doctrine of God's predictable corporate sanctions in history. Christians do not believe that God will back them up in history when they bring a covenant lawsuit. If God is a wimp in history, they conclude, then His people should go and do likewise. So they do. This they have done for over three centuries. At best, they have served as non-commissioned officers in one humanist army or another: left wing or right wing.

God is a cosmic terrorist in eternity against those whom He hates. He is usually a nanny to His elect in history while they are young. But modern Christians downplay God's terrorism in history, preferring to view Him as a nag. God's enemies do not grant Him even this much authority. Until the corporate negative sanctions come, this generation of Christians is unlikely to change its view of God. They much prefer a nagging God to a sanctions-bringer. In this, they have sided with their covenantal enemies. For this, they are in bondage to them. Scarecrow theology has done its work well.

Biblical Economics Today is published six times a year, alternating with **Christian Reconstruction**. It is published by the Institute for Christian Economics, a non-profit, tax-exempt educational organization. A free six-month subscription is sent to those who ask to be put on the mailing list. **Subscriptions:** P.O. Box 8000, Tyler, TX 75711. Donations are fully tax deductible. Checks should be made out to **Institute for Christian Economics**.