

THE BIBLICAL EDUCATOR

"To know wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding" Proverbs 1:2

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PIETY AND CHRISTIAN RECONSTRUCTION

By David H. Chilton

Some time ago, I wrote a review of Arnold Dallimore's definitive biography of George Whitefield. In the course of the article, I criticized some of Whitefield's actions and viewpoints (particularly regarding marriage), while also affirming my respect for the tremendous evangelistic labors and achievements of the man. I mentioned that his errors stemmed from his unconscious acceptance of Neoplatonism—the idea that the "spiritual" (i.e., non-physical, internal) aspect of life is superior to the more physical aspects. There is, of course, a measure of truth in this—regeneration begins on the inside, etc.—but the Neoplatonic perspective implicitly denies the biblical facts that *man is a unit*, and that God is concerned with the whole of our being and with all of life. Neoplatonism leads to a spiritual contempt for God's material creation and for the laws God has ordained in such areas as government and economics. Without trying to discredit Whitefield's ministry, I did draw several observations about the deleterious aspects of his views for the church as a whole.

I was not exactly deluged with mail. A journalistic rule of thumb is that for every person who writes a letter to the editor, there are about a thousand who feel the same way. The letter expressing the feelings of those thousand people came from H. Carl Shank, Assistant Pastor of Grace Church (Vienna, VA). He disagrees with me on certain points, but he is writing as a friend. His entire letter (in italics) and my response are below. I considered the issue important enough to devote a great deal of space to it, even though its relevance to Christian schools is only indirect. I hope this exchange will encourage other spokesmen for the *other* thousands to let me know what you all think.

A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

As a Reformed pastor and Christian school teacher I can readily appreciate your desire for Christian reconstruction by Scriptural reformation. However, as in most of the issues published by ICE (and affiliates), there has been a dismaying trend toward the downplay of Christian piety and the ever-present need of the centrality of the gospel message to radically change sinners. Such a trend appeared evident to me in your review of Dallimore's book.

I too have certain grievances with the Banner of Truth style of writing, especially in Iain Murray's historically narrow selectivity of articles for the magazine. I too favor a thorough re-evaluation of the philosophical presuppositions and tenets under which the Puritans and others, like Whitefield, operated. I too agree that man's purpose is "godly dominion." Indeed, biblical salvation is not a catch-phrase for the type of Arminian, decisionistic preaching that wearies me and greatly distresses me.

However, I am not so certain that rigorous biblical exegesis of the terms kingdom, salvation, covenantal, etc. would yield your thesis, which is shared by all Chalcedon writers. That thesis tells us that salvation is a mere

pretext for the important function of man, namely the fulfillment of physical, earthly and civil rule under God over this earth. In other words, salvation according to Chalcedonian tenets seems to be the forerunner and means to the fulfillment of the Genesis cultural mandate. I certainly hold to the abiding validity of the cultural mandate of Genesis, but "Christ and Him crucified" is in fact the central theme of Scripture and the central need of mankind. Most definitely I deny a totally "individualistic, internal and immaterial" cast to the salvation theology of the Bible. Yet that aspect certainly is there. Moreover, people are still brought into the kingdom one by one as God works individual new birth in the internal recesses of a person's being. Post-fall mankind will never return to an Edenic state, at least not on the earth as we know it presently. Indeed, our home is "in heaven" because our inheritance with Christ our Lord is there. Our concern is eternal life that begins now and will be consummated at Christ's return. Our desire should be to know Christ, as Paul desired to know Him (Phil. 3).

To criticize Whitefield's idea of marriage may be to the point, but for him in his God-assigned kingdom work, perhaps a marriage partner on earth would have rivaled an intensity of devotion for God's glory and for the spread of the gospel that few of us possess today. You decry Whitefield's "pietism" or his "mysticism," calling it Neoplatonism. Perhaps that is philosophically correct. However, it seems to me that Whitefield's desires mirrored exactly the desire Paul expressed: "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21). No matter how that is exegeted, it always comes up saying in Chalcedonian terms that Paul is a Neoplatonist, a mystic, who defines spirituality in terms of transcending our creaturely limitations. Indeed, Paul knew and taught a theology of serving God in every sphere of life. But he knew a far deeper theological truth—he was a pilgrim and stranger to this earth. This terrain was not to be his abiding possession, even if ruled by thoroughly Christian men with thoroughly Scriptural reformation principles. Paul had learned a lesson on "wilderness theology," a lesson the Israelites did not learn thoroughly enough.

This naturally involves us in dealing with the issue of Christian piety. Piety is not a nasty word. It does not have to assume or imply a theology or life devoid of sophisticated, intellectual and reformational study of creation and the Scriptures. It does not deny the cultural mandate. It can be properly taught and profitably exercised. From my study, it seems that the pursuit of biblical piety was central to the Puritans and to Calvin. One can scorn their "heavenly language," but for the most part they knew God through Christ in His word in a way and depth we have yet to discover. ICE (and its affiliates) talks a lot about Christian reconstruction and Scriptural reformation. The Puritans and their spiritual sons, like Whitefield, engaged in the business of reconstruction and reformation through hours of fervent prayer, intense supplication for souls of eternally dying men. They preached unflinchingly and faithfully the riches of the gospel and applied it to where people lived, worked, and taught. They knew God—and what reforms society underwent from their century onwards largely came from the seeds sown with the tears (and sometimes sealed with the blood) of our Puritan forefathers. Can any of you—can any of us—lay claim to

such infiltration of life as the "pietistical" Puritans and their followers in the faith had?

Such a challenge can be dismissed, but it really cannot be ignored. I truly and sincerely hope you re-examine some of the issues raised and implied in your review. Again, I am thankful for helpful clarification and analyses of issues relating to the kingdom of Christ.

Yours in His service, H. Carl Shank

EDITOR'S RESPONSE

I do not have the room to answer every line of Mr. Shank's argument, but I believe the following will be a substantial response. I have divided his argument into the following areas: (1) the nature of Christian piety; (2) the centrality of the gospel; (3) salvation and its relationship to the cultural mandate; (4) Whitefield's attitude toward marriage; (5) the question of Paul's "neoplatonism"; and (6) the piety of the Puritans. I aimed for his major points, and picked off a few stray minor ones as well; but I made no attempt to untangle every target. I know that's a mixed metaphor, but if Mr. Shank can do it—I've heard of sowing seeds, but *sealing* them?—so can I. (And there goes the first minor point. I've tried not to be picky, but I just couldn't resist that one. The rest of my disagreements are more substantial, so read on.)

CHRISTIAN PIETY

Two questions must be answered on this point: (1) What is the nature of true Christian piety? (2) Does the ICE really "downplay" its importance?

Christian piety, if it means anything at all, is godly living in every aspect of thought and activity. It is, in the words of the Oxford English Dictionary, to be "careful of the duties owed by created beings to God..." Piety, therefore, must be radically distinguished from its counterfeit in *pietism*—which centers on rapturous emotional experiences and "devotional exercises," while steadfastly refusing to apply God's word to God's world. For example, Israel and Judah in the eighth century B.C. were often *pietistic*, with much seemingly devotional activity going on; but they were in fact godless. The prophets, speaking for God, denounced such false religion, often using strong and offensive language: "I hate, I reject your festivals, nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies... Take away from Me the noise of your songs..." (Amos 5:21-23); "Bring your worthless offerings no longer, their incense is an abomination to Me. New moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly" (Isa. 1:13). There was nothing wrong with these acts of worship as such, for they had been appointed by God. But while the people were doing all these things, they were also neglecting to obey God's word in all of life; and this neglect turned all their vaunted piety into blasphemous hypocrisy.

Pietism takes many forms. In our day the most obvious is that which is simply a cowardly retreat in the face of opposition: the pietist is too busy with devotional exercises to get involved in working for God's glory. There is certainly a proper place for devotional exercises; but, after all, the basic reason for any exercise at all is to enable one to live a healthier and more hard-working life. The egotistical parlor-athlete whose entire existence is spent flexing and primping in front of gymnasium mirrors is of no use to anyone—for him, "exercise" is a means of avoiding the demands of real life. Jesus did not send the apostles into monasteries, but into the world, with the commission to *disciple the nations*. Our exercises are to make us strong for service.

Do reconstructionist writers downplay Christian piety? I don't believe so, and I could quote extensively from Rushdoony, North, Bahnsen *et al* to document it. But since the occasion which prompted Mr. Shank to write was an article of mine, I will speak for myself. I do heartily believe in prayer, devotions, self-examination, adoration of Jesus Christ, cultivation of Christian graces and attitudes, and so on. I seek to lay a due stress on these things in my sermons. I admit that I don't stress them in my articles, and there is a reason for this. In a limited space, articles for *The Biblical Educator* have an overall goal: to teach teachers how to

teach. Our primary purpose is not to teach teachers how to manage their personal devotions (although an article on this theme might be accepted). The same goes for the other ICE newsletters: they are written to deal with specific issues and problems that faithful Christians must face, after they're done "exercising." A fundamental thesis of the Reconstructionists is that piety is not for the prayer closet alone, but for all of life—that prayer-closet piety *alone* is not piety but pietism. But to say this is not to deny the need for a prayer closet. Piety, if it is genuine, will not be restricted to either internalism or externalism. The godly man will seek to honor God at every point of his existence. No area of life is exempt from our Lord's demands. Thus, in dealing with these issues, the ICE newsletters *are* teaching "Christian piety," for to neglect such matters is impious. *The standard of piety is the law of God.*

THE CENTRALITY OF THE GOSPEL

The gospel of Jesus Christ is central to any genuine program of Christian reconstruction. The preaching of morality—even *biblical* morality—will not change hearts. Sinners are transformed only by the effectual working of the Holy Spirit through the message of the crucified and resurrected Savior. But that is only the beginning. Once a man has been converted, what then? The gospel has changed him from death to life: he is now supposed to *live*. He must discover God's standards for his living in every area—in his family, his work, his everyday activity. Shall we then accuse him of departing from the centrality of the gospel? No! It is the gospel that has made the difference! He is applying God's standards to his life just because the gospel is central.

For example: Let's say you are teaching mathematics in a Christian school, and I interrupt your class with the accusation that you have not presented the plan of salvation—that you are wasting time with long division instead of justification by faith. You will answer: "If my students are going to grow up to be mature, faithful stewards of Jesus Christ, they need to learn how to balance their accounts. It is necessary for them to understand and believe the gospel. But the gospel must bear fruit in their lives. They must become responsible men and women, and that is the goal of my instruction." And much the same would be said for any of the disciplines in a Christian school. To answer otherwise would be a mandate for closing down the schools altogether, and teaching "the gospel" alone. And even that would last for only one generation, since we will have to quit wasting time in phonics. Our children would grow up unable to read the Bible, and that would be the end of preaching the gospel. So much for its centrality.

The point is that the ICE newsletters are not evangelistic tracts, any more than a biology class is a revival meeting. The gospel is central and foundational to all that we do. But our publications are addressed, for the most part, to Christians engaged in the task of applying God's standards to God's world. We believe that the gospel must be integrated into all the disciplines—that the disciplines are, in fact, meaningless without the gospel. But that does not mean that preaching the gospel is a substitute for teaching the disciplines.

SALVATION AND THE CULTURAL MANDATE

I think I know what Mr. Shank has in mind when he says that our thesis holds salvation to be "a mere pretext"—but a dictionary and a thesaurus would have helped. What he *means* to say is: Reconstructionists believe that conversion is the first step in the Christian life, and that it leads to the fulfillment of God's original mandate to have dominion over the earth. And he is absolutely correct. (Especially now that I've corrected him. Of course, if he really did mean to say *pretext*, he's theologically mistaken. But I prefer to regard it as a semantic error. If I'm wrong, then he's more wrong than I think he is.)

Adam and Eve were created as righteous, in the image of God. As such, they were given the task of ruling the creation under God. When they rebelled, they fell from this standing, and the image of God in man became marred, disfigured, twisted and broken. Godly dominion is impossible for all the unregenerate posterity of our first parents. But

salvation in Christ changes all this. Justification restores a man to righteousness in the Last Adam. Regeneration makes us a *new creation* (2 Cor. 5:17), and remakes us in the image of God (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10). We now have the right standing with God first enjoyed by Adam—one from which there is no danger of falling. In Christ, God has permanently restored man to his original standing; and as the new humanity we are to return to our original task of dominion. Thus, conversion is *not* the end; it is the *means*—certainly, the *indispensable means*—to the end: fulfilling God's plan for His creation. Conversion is the crucial first step, but that does not change the fact that it is still the *first step*. The goal has always been godly dominion.

The subject is much too vast to go into here (although I plan to deal with it extensively at another time), but it is extremely significant that the Bible uses a great amount of Edenic imagery to describe salvation: We are called the “new creation”; we are said to be remade in God's image; we partake in salvation of the tree of life; God promises to return the earth to Eden-like conditions (cf. Isa. 11:1-9; 51:3; Ezek. 36:35); and so on. The point of all this language is to remind us of our calling, and to assure us that we will be able to fulfill it. Reconstructionists are not anti-evangelistic (*I'm not, anyway*); but we are saying that evangelism is not the goal. To declare that *birth* is not the goal of life is not to be anti-birth; it simply means that infancy is not the pinnacle of human achievement. Produce all the babies you want—the more, the better. But you had better concern yourself with feeding and training them as well, enabling them to grow into responsible maturity. Christians may not have been consistent in this, but it is—or should be—central to any program of Christian education. We are training our students to be good workers for the kingdom in every sphere of life.

This was one of the great insights of the Reformation: that every lawful activity can and must be pursued for the glory of God. A man may have a calling as a pipefitter as surely as another man may have a calling to preach. God is glorified in any work which develops His earth. Janitor and statesman, judge and electrician, scientist and kindergarten teacher will alike stand before God at the Last Day to render an account of their service for Him. God does not call a man to be a plumber only in order that he may witness to unregenerates with overflowing toilets. *The work, in and of itself, brings glory to God.*

What about Paul's desires “to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified”? Taken too literally, of course, that means that it's wrong even to speak of the resurrection! But Paul goes further than that. In the same letter (1 Corinthians), he discusses not only the crucifixion and the resurrection, but also the following: litigation, food, marriage, sex, wages, hair length, division of labor, tongues, hats, the place of women, biology, and care for the poor. He seems to have departed from the simple gospel—and in the very letter which began with his declaration that he would never do so! As we all know, of course, he never abandoned the centrality of the gospel at all. The meaning of his declaration is that the gospel is the presuppositional framework through which he examines these other issues. In Christ all things hold together (Col. 1:17), and all things must be seen in relation to Him. He is not arguing for a “know-nothing” Christianity. He is arguing for a know-everything Christianity, and declaring that it is impossible to know anything at all apart from the knowledge of Christ, “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3). Our knowledge of Christ is certainly defective if we feel that an attempt to understand all areas of life in terms of Christ's lordship is somehow a betrayal of the gospel. The gospel, rightly understood, requires such an attempt—and promises us continuous renewal to “true knowledge” according to the image of God (Col. 3:10): thus our attempts will be successful as we submit to Him. Reconstructionists should be corrected when they fail to apply the Scriptures to the issues of life. But they cannot be faulted for seeking to apply the Scriptures to the issues in the first place. Dominion under Christ is not a departure from the gospel. It is the *point* of the gospel. To claim “the centrality of the gospel” must eventually lead to the bold question: “Central to *what*?” It seems odd that those who are trying to answer the question are accused of downplaying the centrality of the gospel!

WHITEFIELD'S ATTITUDE TOWARD MARRIAGE

The idea that marriage is, *in general*, a hindrance to a godly man is unbiblical: “it is not good for man to be alone (Gen. 2:18). On the other hand, marriage *may* be a hindrance in a *specific* historical situation (the context of Paul's discussion in 1 Cor. 7 is “the present distress,” v. 26). I trust we all are agreed so far.

Now, as far as Whitehead is concerned, the issue is simple. If he really felt that *his* circumstances required celibacy, he should never have married. Having married, his biblical duty was then to love his wife, and shut up about what he might have been without her. “Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released” (1 Cor. 7:27). In other words, choose a wife, or don't; but don't complain about your choice.

If, however, you choose not to marry, you can forget about becoming ordained, since having been married is a biblical qualification for the eldership (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:6). If you're too “spiritual” to be a husband, you're too “spiritual” to be a church officer as well: God wants experienced household-managers only as His officers (1 Tim. 3:4-5, 12). Now don't get mad at *me*. I'm not the one who made the rules.

The historical fact is that on several counts (not only marriage), Whitefield was a Neoplatonist. He didn't get it from the Bible. He got it from his university education in classical humanism (of course, seminary preparation is much different nowadays—it's still humanism, but the *classical* variety is a little out of vogue; besides, Aristotle is too difficult for today's graduate students, and “Christian Marxism” is lots more fun—oops! I mean sociologically relevant). No matter how much it hurts, we should be brave and face the hard, biblical truth: *marriage is a blessing*. “He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the LORD” (Prov. 18:22); and that should be compared to the passage in which *Wisdom* says, “He who finds me find life, and obtains favor from the LORD” (Prov. 8:35). True, “a constant dripping on a day of steady rain and a contentious woman are alike” (Prov. 27:15); the answer is not celibacy, but marrying wisely. And anyway, the “constant dripping” wasn't coming from *Mrs.* Whitefield.

WAS PAUL A NEOPLATONIST?

I am in something of a fog at this point (some of you may want to question the last three words of that statement). Mr. Shank admits that my characterization of Whitefield as a Neoplatonist may be “philosophically correct.” Yet he goes on to say that in this Whitefield “mirrored exactly” Paul's attitude. In charity, I've tried to construe that as another “semantic error,” but I can't. I've examined it from every side, but no matter what I do, it still seems like a genuine error of substance. Let me be absolutely clear: you can't have it both ways. You can't say, “Whitefield was a Neoplatonist” and “Whitefield agreed with Paul.” They can't *both* be true.

Paul said, “To live is Christ, and to die is gain.” Mr. Shank feels that, “no matter how that is exegeted,” it still means a Neoplatonic, mystical wish to transcend one's creaturely limitations. Space doesn't permit a full exegesis of the verse here, but I do think it can be exegeted without making Paul sound like a medieval flagellant. Take that word *gain*. I don't think I would be twisting Scripture to insist that our very real “gain” at death (see 2 Cor. 5:8) will *not* include becoming gods ourselves. Death doesn't deify. Agreed? Okay, then even after death, regardless of the benefits, we'll still be *creatures*, right? Therefore, when Paul spoke of the gain to be received at death, he was *not* speaking of “transcending his creaturely limitations,” correct? *Voila!* You have just read an exegesis which, incredibly enough, did not lead to Neoplatonic conclusions. (I didn't do it with mirrors. It's actually pretty easy. All you have to do is this: *Don't start with Plato, and you won't end up with him.*)

In concluding this section, I must comment on Mr. Shank's statement about “wilderness theology.” I don't really know what he means by the term (in some circles, that may be a damning admission). But I do know this much: the basic idea in the wilderness was to get *through* it as soon as possible, and get on with the conquest. God didn't want His people to

stay there, and their 40-year "wilderness experience" was a *judgment*. It certainly wasn't anything to be proud of. The Jews dropped dead learning their wilderness theology, and it was their children who learned "Promised-Land Theology." They left the wilderness to the buzzards and mystics, and moved on to victory. I'm with them.

THE PIETY OF THE PURITANS

I agree (finally) that "the pursuit of biblical piety" was important to the Puritans. Circle the word *biblical*, and see the section headed "Christian Piety" above for my definitions. Moreover, I know of no reconstructionist writer who has ever scorned their heavenly language. There is nothing essentially wrong with talking about heaven. It is wrong only when it becomes a means of escaping from earth and the duties God has assigned to us here and now. The Puritan longing for heaven was biblical and realistic, and it was balanced with their deep sense of calling. As William Haller wrote: "Men who have assurance that they are to inherit heaven have a way of presently taking possession of earth" (*The Rise of Puritanism*, [1938] 1972, p. 162). Their Anglican contemporaries talked about heaven also; but there was a significant difference, according to John F. H. New: "Anglicanism was a religion of aspiration, and Puritanism of perspiration" (*Anglican and Puritan: The Basis of Their Opposition, 1558-1640*, 1964, p. 104). The Puritans wanted heaven, but they wanted earth too. They believed that *all things* were their inheritance in Christ (Rom. 8:32); they believed in an earthly victory for the people of God; and they went ahead and took possession.

Consider just one example (I could give many)—that of the great Scottish Puritan, Samuel Rutherford. He is known to many Christians through his oft-reprinted *Letters* (the most recent edition was published last year by Moody Press). Every page of this book reflects his all-encompassing devotion to Jesus Christ and his longing to be eternally in His presence. The intimacy of Rutherford's expressions is almost embarrassing—it's like reading someone else's love-letters. But Rutherford was no pietist. He wrote another work called *Lex Rex* (published last year by Sprinkle Publications)—sort of a 17th-century version of *The Institutes of Biblical Law*. In his day it was a political blockbuster, and he would certainly have been executed for writing it if he hadn't died first. Charles II had to content himself with publicly burning the book. My point is this: Considering the state of the present debate between the

Pietists and the Reconstructionists, it seems incredible that the two books were authored by the same man. Many who like the *Letters* would think *Lex Rex* too "carnal" and "worldly"; and (I fear) some who enjoy Rutherford's politics would disdain to read his more "devotional" works. For my part, I wish the two groups would get together. Rutherford himself does not appear to have realized he was doing anything extraordinary. What looks to us like "two strains" in his thought was really *one*: all-out devotion to Jesus Christ in every area of life. When it was appropriate, he wrote poetry about his personal relationship to Jesus; and when it was appropriate, he exuberantly blasted royal absolutism and laid down the biblical principles for a just law-order. Do you see a dichotomy or inconsistency in this? I don't, any more than I see one between Romans 8 and 13. It's the same man writing in each case. More importantly, it's the same Lord, who is over all.

Admittedly, reconstructionism *can* degenerate into an unbiblical externalism, just as the theonomic revival under Ezra became warped and turned into Pharisaism. But it doesn't have to—and it does only when we forget the principle of Jesus' lordship over *all* of life. The Bible commands both personal devotion and cultural transformation according to biblical law. We should heartily abhor any "either-or" mentality about these things. We don't need to abandon one for the other. *True piety must include both*. But we must be sure to get our standards for both from Scripture alone. We must not baptize the immoral writings of a gaggle of ancient Greek homosexual "philosophers" in order to find out how to get close to God. That has been one of the most serious errors of the past two millennia of church history, and it is taking centuries for us to get out of it. Some sections of the church haven't moved a step beyond Aquinas on this point. On the other hand, it may be easy for some of us to react by falling into the opposite error—and, even though I believe Mr. Shank is mistaken regarding certain aspects of both the problem and the solution, I also believe he is sincerely trying to correct us on this point. We do need to warn one another against sin, and nothing is so easy as fleeing from one sin into the clutches of another. We must reason together on the basis of Scripture, and I invite further comments from interested readers (although I cannot promise to devote this much space to the subject in the near future—we have to get back to the Christian school business). The answer will always be genuinely biblical piety, and the direction will always, and only, be found in God's inerrant word.