

TENTMAKERS

INTERDENOMINATIONAL SERVICE

by Gary North

What are the two most important Christian doctrines? What two doctrines, if they were abandoned, would utterly destroy the Church? More to the point, what two doctrines, because they have been abandoned over the last century, today condemn those Institutions that call themselves churches? There can be no doubt: 1) the Trinity and 2) the creation.

Some people would argue that the doctrine of salvation (soteriology) is more important than the doctrine of creation. Such people are humanists, either incipient or outright. God does not exist in order to save man from his sins; He exists in order to honor Himself and be honored by His creation. Anything that detracts from either the doctrine of the Trinity or the doctrine of creation elevates some aspect of the creation above God, for it denies the nature of God, and it denies the aseity (self-being) of God. Jesus died to save men from sin and to save the creation from the destruction that would otherwise have followed as a result of man's sin. But the Second Person of the Trinity does not exist to save men from their sins or to save the creation.

If the Creator is fundamentally different from His creation, then man cannot ever become God. God can become man, and did, but the Incarnation was a top-down operation, not a bottom-up operation. It is Satan's lie that man can become God, for he offers power from below as an alternative to power from above.

Thus, any world-and-life view which is not rooted in these two doctrines cannot survive the test of time, for the test of time is an aspect of the testing of God. We begin an analysis in every field with these two doctrines, or else we shall be led into serious error. Like a circular power saw whose blade is set at an improper angle, if we attempt to cut with it, no matter how much time we spend sharpening the blade, it will cut erroneously.

The doctrine of the Trinity informs us that God is many and God is one. Three Persons yet one Person, diversity yet unity: God is both simultaneously.

This being the case, when we begin to construct institutions, we must create a structure which recognizes the legitimacy of both unified action and plural actions. Men must look to the goals of the local organization or branch within the framework of the goals of the overall organization. Beyond that, they must consider the needs and limitations of society at large. Society offers benefits to those who serve it effectively, but it also offers restraints (costs).

This outlook is innately Trinitarian. It refuses to sacrifice the many to the one, or the one to the many. When men fail to honor this principle in any aspect of their lives, they cripple themselves and their work. They fail to achieve the long-term success that they want (other things being equal).

The doctrine of creation reforms us that men must build

from the bottom up, for we are not God, yet administer from the top down, for we are made in God's image. The flow of blessings is from above (Deut. 8:18; James 1:17), under the sovereignty of God. But the decision-making of any institution must rely on information transmitted from the environment (below) and judged in terms of the standards from above (the Bible). The totally tyrannical (top-down organization) cannot compete in the long run with decentralized (bottom-up) organizations that use the top only to set general policy and to serve as a court of appeals.

Thus, Christian social theory, being trinitarian and creationist, teaches a distinctively biblical concept of the division of labor: the decentralized hierarchy, which is simultaneously plural and unified.

The Inter-Ecclesiastical Division of Labor

I Corinthians 12 is a passage that deals with the gifts of the church, Christ is the head, and church members serve as the members of Christ's body. But we can extend the analogy. Various local churches can serve as a denominational or associational body, and denominations serve as members of the overall body of Christ.

Charismatics can fill up large churches, but too much of their worship is a form of entertainment and amusement. Sometimes Charismatic worship services are systematically and deliberately mindless. At the same time, the members are willing to serve as "shock troops" in unpopular causes. They are not embarrassed by appearing foolish to the world. Arminian Baptists and Independent fundamentalists can build day schools by the dozens, but Baptist-fundamentalist curricula are demonstrably second-rate in terms of content. (Show me a Baptist day school that teaches its students either biblical Hebrew or Greek, Latin or German, especially in the grades below the ninth. Show me an advanced, explicitly Christian mathematics curriculum anywhere.) Still, students do receive some discipline, and are fit for better service than would have been possible otherwise. Calvinists have for centuries provided the best scholarship in Protestant Christendom, but hardly anyone reads it, given the minimal numbers of Calvinists. There is an inverse relationship between the theological precision of the sermons and the size of the congregations.

These observations could have been made ten years ago or a half a century ago. There are some exceptions, as some groups select aspects of each other's programs. The exceptions are increasing over time, too. But on the whole, Charismatic have only the haziest notions of theology, Calvinists have only the most diminutive churches and missions programs, and Baptists have only a minimal ability to co-operate with anyone else, even other Baptists. (Especially other Baptists!)

What is desperately needed is for each group to set up training and information centers in its own specialty. This requires that leaders in each group really can recognize their own specialties. If they persist in believing that "our group provides the best of everything," they will continue to insulate themselves from the body of Christ in general. They are being foolish. Hands are not feet, hearts are not minds, satellite T.V. networks are not libraries.

Pat Robertson has created a graduate school in communications. This makes sense. He has not created a seminary. This also makes sense.

Oral Roberts has created a university and a huge hospital building with a lot of debt. This doesn't make sense. The school is average or possibly slightly above average in terms of academic performance, and the hospital's interior facilities are only about 25% complete. When he dies, and his television fund-raising appeals cease, what happens to an empire that absorbs something in the neighborhood of \$350,000 per day? What if he had concentrated strictly on his law school, which today is the best Christian law school in the country? What if he had become the national Christian leader in producing lawyers for Christian resistance?

Today's Best Model

There is one ministry today—and in my view, only one ministry—which has specialized effectively, has delivered its services to the whole body of Christ, has minimized its promotional budget to an astounding extent, and has mobilized literally millions of people right under the noses of the humanist media without leaving a trace. It has taken a crucially important area of Christian concern and has produced a mass-market program which is not watered down to the point of irrelevance. That ministry is Bill Gothard's "Basic Youth Conflicts." It is the archetype, the model by which all other interdenominational ministries ought to be judged, and most denominational ministries as well.

The subject area? The family. It is meeting a crying need, and it is doing so on a minimal budget, using little more than word-of-mouth promotion. It is addressing its subject matter in terms of Old Testament law. It offers hope to those who attend. It is not a parachurch ministry, but co-operates with local churches. And it has been blessed beyond what anyone could have predicted a decade ago.

The secret of success? I find it difficult to judge. I offer these suggestions. First, Gothard is not ordained. He is not a rival to any minister's empire—and there are a lot of little empires floating around. Second, Gothard is not a media figure. He arouses no envy. Third, he is using biblical law to solve problems that only biblical law can consistently solve. Fourth, the particular problems are family problems, and no church can avoid them. Few pastors have developed effective, consistent methods of solving them. Hence, high demand and little supply. Result: a monopoly. Gothard does not extract monopoly prices for his service. Result: huge demand. Fifth, he continues to apply biblical law to new areas of family concern. Result: repeat business. It is a classic

case of success through service. It is a classic case of entrepreneurship. He identified a real and continuing need, so he does not need to advertise heavily to create demand. His service works. Word-of-mouth advertising takes over. He helps other leaders with a key stumbling block of their ministries. Hence, he gains their enthusiastic support.

Gothard is creating the foundation of a revolution in the world-and-life view of Christian pastors. He is doing it silently, without public exposure or media awareness, and therefore media opposition. He is going about his business as a servant. He has unquestionably developed the most cost-effective mass-market ministry in American history.

So it can be done. Other Christian leaders and potential leaders need to look at this ministry as their model, for it is the only model of its kind. It is the best example available in this century of a mass-audience ministry which has not compromised its message.

It has a few weaknesses. Like so many of today's leaders, Gothard is not forthright about admitting where he is getting his ideas. He lacks footnotes. Also, I think he has neglected to develop other means of communications and programs that are still within the view of family concerns. For one thing, there is no newsletter. (Can any ministry exist without a newsletter?) I am aware of no intensive training course for pastors. There are no regional centers to provide continuing training and information. It may be a one-man, one-lifetime ministry. But most ministries are anyway, so this may not be an important criticism. And perhaps he has recognized his limits in managerial ability, and has decided not to "rise to his personal level of incompetence."

In other words, he knows his strengths and his weaknesses as few Christian leaders do. Therefore, his ministry has been blessed. For details, write:

Basic Youth Conflicts
P. O. Box 1
Oak Brook, IL 60521

Conclusion

I believe that every pastor with a recognizable talent has an obligation to create an interdenominational ministry to train other people to imitate his talent or at least implement his tested findings. He should develop training materials—tapes, workbooks, pamphlets, or whatever—that will multiply. His solutions should be other people's solutions. He should cast his bread upon the waters, in order that it might return to him seven-fold.

If a pastor has no talent, he should develop one. When you read—and you should read—Douglas Hyde's *Dedication and Leadership* (Notre Dame University Press, 1956, \$3.95), and you see how Hyde, an ex-Communist, developed Communist leaders out of stuttering, shy incompetents, you will recognize the truth that the Communists have long recognized: everyone has some latent skill that can be developed. The question is: Will it be developed? Also, will it be developed for the glory of God?