

THE THEOLOGY OF BILL GOTHARD

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What do Bill Gothard and hula-hoops have in common? Some would say that they both go around in circles, but that is not what I had in mind. I suggest that three traits common to Gothard and hula-hoops are responsible for their almost incredible successes: they are both inexpensive; the principles by which both work are simple; for many Americans they both work.

A simple, inexpensive, workable scheme will generate a following. The success of Bill Gothard's Seminar in Basic Youth Conflicts is due, in part, to its having these three qualities. For a maximum of \$100, and sometimes for less, a man may take his wife and older teenagers to a conference which lasts for a week and which convenes only at night, except on Friday and Saturday when meetings are held in the afternoons. Participants attend seminars which begin with a lecture on self-image and progress through an assortment of other subjects. They listen for three hours each session to a small, unimposing, conservatively attired teacher who speaks with an uninspiring voice usually in monosyllabic words, employing only an overhead projector for an assistant. There is little music and frequent prayer. By all modern canons of mass manipulation, the Seminar in Basic Youth Conflicts ought to disintegrate to nothingness. It does not; audiences vary from ten to sixteen thousand!

Although I cannot recall the use of the term, I found Gothard's underlying theme to be the providence of God. He says that God manifested his providential concern for the human family from the time of creation. The sovereignty of God guarantees the perpetuity of his providential oversight until his purpose has been achieved. Gothard advises each person to view himself as an unfinished painting and patiently to allow the Master Artist to complete his masterpiece. The goodness of God is certain, making it possible for a Christian to endure any temporary hardship or reversal. A wise Christian perceives that tribulations are part of God's educational plan. God's purpose ultimately will triumph, and believers will share individually and corporately in the final consummation.

A major theme of the Gothard seminar is the development of proper attitudes. Relying heavily on Jesus' teaching that thought and attitude are the precursors of action, Gothard says that the seedbed of the human dilemma is often attitudes like impatience, irritation, jealousy, envy, selfishness, hatred, and bitterness. This last attitude is the culprit which most often disrupts life, according to Gothard. Gothard's critics often allege that his is guilty of legalism, but this charge dissipates when Gothard's emphasis on attitudes producing actions is taken into account.

Perhaps Gothard is best known for his emphasis upon "the line of authority." For this concept Gothard has been both blessed and anathematized profusely. His teaching about authority has been clouded by some well-meaning followers who have emphasized this aspect of Gothard's teaching without incorporating the remainder of the system, thus misrepresenting Gothard completely. Gothard's chain of command grows naturally out of a confidence in the sovereignty and providence of God. It exists in Gothard's program for several reasons including a concern that all Christians learn to adopt an attitude of acquiescence before God.

Gothard's influence is so great that his teaching deserves a detailed appraisal, but we shall have to be content with four observations.

1. Bill Gothard is not a theologian or a biblical scholar. However, he doesn't claim to be. He is a youth director with a bent toward systematizing. A keen observer of people, this Guru, as *Christianity Today* denominated him, has a love for God's Word and a prodigious faith in God. Occasionally his theological limitations become apparent in his exegesis of Scripture. Sometimes his attitudes toward legitimate inquiries into philosophy and psychology are unduly harsh, but in fairness it must be said that he has studied to improve these deficiencies.

2. Gothard's observation of people, coupled with his study of the Bible, have enabled him to see in the Bible a system of thought containing ideal horizontal and vertical relationships for man. One leaves Gothard's seminar with the feeling that though he has not produced any new evidence at all, still he has put the old evidence together in such a striking fashion that one sees the whole Bible in a different way. This idea of the Bible as a book of essential principles for happy and successful living, a thesaurus of instruction which every believer can comprehend and apprehend, is a major factor in the success of the seminar.

3. Gothard's basic simplicity, yet cogent and well illustrated perspicacity, draws the crowds. Leaders in churches should learn from the Gothard phenomenon that people want theology, but they want it in terms that they can comprehend and personally apply to life's encounters. The amazing reception given to Gothard by evangelical Christians, many of them Baptists, is ample testimony that most Christian people want to hear, not an erudite theologian expounding the subtleties of the latest philosophical theorems, but a man who speaks as a messenger from God.

4. Finally, our reactions and responses to Gothard ought to be tempered by the spirit of fair scholarship, one rule of which is that secondary sources are inferior to primary sources. Before you become a critic of Gothard's system, you ought to attend the basic seminar from beginning to end. Many of the imagined rough edges disappear when you hear the whole. The basic seminar is far superior to the advanced seminar. In the latter Gothard digresses into his personal philosophy. But for anyone who listens to the Bible seriously, the basic seminar will be helpful and provocative.

Addendum

Obviously, this article was written in 1976, when the Basic Youth Conflicts Seminar was cresting. Not too long afterward, serious inconsistencies in Bill Gothard's teaching and his personal behavior began to unravel the ministry. Recent allegations of moral failure have undermined him altogether.

For two reasons, this is tragic. First, sorrow overflows when an older saint picks apart his own ministry in the end. Second, the principles of the Basic Youth Conflicts Seminar were not balanced with a healthy church emphasis and evangelism was virtually foreign to the seminars. That said, the content was generally correct and I know many who defeated bitterness and discovered trust in God through the seminar. This renders the outcome of recent days tragic but negates no biblical truth elucidated.

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