

ample of such a case. The church is the next unit of authority. It does not rule the family's affairs unless the above mentioned situation occurs. It is above the state in God's order. Christians will judge angels and more (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:1-5). God's rule supercedes man's (Acts 4:18-19; 5:27-29). Therefore, its authority supercedes the state's.

"R. J. Rushdooney, "Corroboration", *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, (The Craig Press, 1973), pp. 565-569. This is a helpful article that briefly touches on the nature of confidentiality in general and privileged communications in particular.

"*Ibid*, p. 567. "Privileged communication rests on the presupposition of the religious function of pastor and doctor as God's servants in the ministry of health. A person's relationship to them is thus not the property of the human agent but of God. This does not deny the duty of the pastor and doctor to urge a person to make restitution where restitution is due; or to urge confession where confession is due. It is their duty to uphold the law of God by urging compliance with it of all who come to them, but they cannot go beyond that fact of counsel."

"*Idem*. "There are exceptions to these rules under certain circumstances, but the basic principle remains true." Rushdooney does not go far enough in defining what those exceptions are or might be.

"Sessila Bok, "The Professional Secret: The Limits of Confidentiality," *The Hastings Center Report*, Feb. '83, pp 24-31. This is a helpful article although not from a biblical perspective. Bok contends that the case for confidentiality rests upon four premises: individual autonomy over personal information, respect for human relationships and intimacy in them, a pledge of silence creates an obligation beyond the respect due to a relationship, and the benefits of confidentiality to those in need of advice, sanctuary, and aid, and in turn society. She allows that all are valid yet not absolute since all may result in serious harm to others. She concludes by saying: "The premises supporting confidentiality are strong, but they cannot support practices of secrecy — whether by individual clients, institution, or professionals — that undermine and contradict the very respect for persons and for human bonds that confidentiality was meant to protect."

"In Matthew 18:15ff Jesus requires revealing facts to a broader circle when an unrepentant brother or sister refuses to be reconciled in a narrower context. The reconciliation should be private if possible [Ed.]

Is Anything Wrong with Bill Gothard's Teachings?

by G. R. Fisher*

[Abstract: In a careful and yet penetrating way, Pastor Fisher notes some disturbing trends in the teaching of Bill Gothard. While appreciating the good in Gothard's ministry, Fisher warns against wholesale acceptance of his teachings.]

Avid followers of the Basic Youth Conflicts ministry may wonder why the question is even being asked. Others not wanting to run the risk of offending their congregation or constituency have wondered why the question has not been asked sooner (of course, by someone else!)

By the title question I am not implying that everything is wrong with Bill Gothard. I am surely not trying to say that all of his teaching is suspect. Some of his teaching has helped some people. I have attended twice the basic seminar as well as pastor's conferences and agree with some of the teaching I heard. But there are trends and directions that seem to go beyond the Bible and really boil down to Mr. Gothard's own subjective, often dogmatic opinions. These trends trouble even some of his most ardent followers.

Wilfred Bockelman's book, *Gothard . . . The Man and His Ministry*,¹ although basically a positive, favorable treatment of Bill Gothard's work, did point out some serious disagreements. This book is not widely accepted or taken seriously because Bockelman himself is unknown. Yet the book is measured and thoughtful, and is still worth reading. One of Mr. Bockelman's conclusions is that we should accept the good we can find at the seminars, but also "beware of some of the dangers."² These dangers are spelled out in his book.

In 1 Corinthians 1:12 Paul warned the Corinthians against seeing one teacher as the final possessor of all truth, as having the final word on everything. This practice was causing division and sinful pride in that local church. A well balanced Christian draws from various godly men in their areas of insight and takes advantage of all legitimate ministries (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:21, 22). While I am not saying that Bill Gothard is all wrong, I surely am sug-

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gesting that he should be more tentative and open to the counsel of men better equipped in the Word than he. There are serious and troubling problems in areas of his teaching and resulting trends that if made a test of fellowship could seriously divide and disrupt the Body of Christ. Let me list just six of these troublesome areas as I see them (not in any particular order, nor in any exhaustive way.)

1. His confused view of divorce

All of Mr. Gothard's early materials make plain that he does not believe a divorce can take place for any reason whatsoever. The exception clause of Matthew 19:9 is avoided by Mr. Gothard's unique view that Jesus is only speaking of Jewish betrothal. The Greek word *mnesteuo* (betrothal) is never mentioned in the chapter or context, only marriage. Tim Crater refutes Gothard's error in his article, "Bill Gothard's View of the Exception Clause."³ He exposes serious weaknesses and fallacies in Gothard's hermeneutical system and shows how Gothard ultimately relies on his own subjective impressions for his conclusions. Bill Gothard refers to the "Spirit of Scripture" and speaks of views as "confirmed by spiritual discernment," which leads Tim Crater to question Bill's leaning toward mysticism and subjectivism in interpretation. Crater's conclusion: Gothard goes beyond Scripture. Jay Adams in his book, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage*⁴, shows why the betrothal or "Engagement Thesis" is erroneous. If the area of divorce and remarriage is so debatable, perhaps Mr. Gothard should leave the issue to the discipline of the local church. Perhaps Mr. Gothard, a graduate of Wheaton College with a background in youth work, should depend on other teachers in the body regarding theology.

Further confusion has been added by the publishing of Mr. Gothard's *Rebuilder's Guide*,⁵ where he says, "The exception clause does refer to illegal marriages such as incest. It may also refer to immorality during the Jewish betrothal period."

The incest statement comes from notes on the following two pages of the guide from Dr. Charles Ryrie. In a full set of notes running to 17 pages (issued by the institute in 1981) Dr. Ryrie (page 6) dismisses the betrothal view and says, "Porenia is nowhere else used in the restricted sense of unchastity during the betrothal period." He goes on to state his view that incestuous marriages (forbidden in Leviticus 18:6-18) give "the key to understanding . . . the Matthean exception clause."⁶

There seems to be some confusion as to Gothard's view of divorce!

2. His subjective guidance system

It seems that Gothard holds a view of extra-biblical guidance by 'inner checks,' 'inner promptings' and feelings of 'inner peace.' An example of this subjectivism is found in the Institute's *Men's Manual*,⁷ where a four-fold test is given for decision making and guidance. It states: "A. The Test of Scriptural Commands." This sounds good and is a good start. "B. The Test of Scriptural Illustrations." This is a bit more subjective and would depend on what illustrations, from where and by whom. "C. The Test of Proper Counsel." Parents and husbands are mentioned as "proper" counsel, but no space is given to the issue of *unsaved* parents and *unsaved* husbands and the kind of counsel they might give. However, Point 'D' seems to undermine and negate all the above since it gives as the final test, "The Test of God's Spirit." This is explained as follows:

A wrong decision may look right, but if we are alert to the prompting of God's Spirit, we will *not have peace in the matter.*
You should have inner peace after the first three tests have been passed. Let the peace of God rule in your hearts (emphasis mine.)

Let it first be noted that the context of Scripture quoted has to do with keeping peace in one's relationships with others in the church. Colossians 3:12 urges kindness and longsuffering; Colossians 3:13 urges forgiveness and condemns quarreling; verse 14 urges love in our responses and relationships; verse 15 deals with one's willingness to keep peace with others. The verse has nothing to do with guidance or decision making. The Scripture verse has been 'wrested' to prove a point. So in Gothard's guidance system an inner feeling of peace is the ultimate test. If we do not have that subjective feeling of peace do we then question the objective statements of Scripture? Feelings of peace should not be employed as a judge over scriptural directions. Churches have had to carry out discipline in obedience to Christ (Matthew 18) while feeling stress, agony, turmoil and spiritual grief. The "Test of God's Spirit" as defined by Gothard is a subjective, error filled, problematic means of guidance.

3. His use of amazing stories and glowing reports to 'prove' his teaching

Every sect and cult has its amazing stories. Seeming miracles or success stories may make a teaching seem more plausible, but it doesn't necessarily make it true. Theology by anecdote may simply amount to manipulation, no matter who uses it. Proper interpretation of Scripture, and not success stories, determines truth. This trend of proving theological views and of in-

interpreting Scripture with a story is dangerous.

4. *His strange view of the direct consequences of our forefathers' sins*

In a recent alumni booklet⁴ Mr. Gothard states, "We were in Adam and a part of his sin." The imputation of Adam's sin to the human race is stated somewhat differently in Romans 5. That this has anything to do with the D.N.A. ladder, as Gothard goes on to state, is debatable. But Gothard's point is the extension of our solidarity with Adam. This, he believes, indicates that we and our physical children are under some kind of direct consequence, not just the social or environmental consequences, of our forefathers' acts of sinning. That being so, according to Gothard, we must agree with God about their sin and ask Him "to remove its consequences from us and from our children."

To enforce this view a story is given of a three year old girl who "did not want to believe in Jesus" until the parents realized their need to confess their sins and the sins of their forefathers. His use of Jeremiah's acknowledgment of the past and present idolatry of Israel (Jeremiah 14:20) is hardly adequate proof. His use of Exodus 20:5 demonstrates his poor exegesis. Here he fails to understand this verse in context. He makes no attempt to discuss the national consequences of Israel's idolatry or to exegete the next verse. Gothard emphasizes sins visited "upon the children unto the third and fourth generation" and neither emphasizes nor explains the pregnant phrase, "of them that hate me." It is also regrettable that he does not properly consider verse 6, "But showing love to thousands who love me and keep my commandments." His view is novel and as far as I know cannot be found in any major commentary. Here Mr. Gothard parts company with good men. A quick glance at his materials on adopted children⁵ shows an extension of this error. Here he teaches that the new parents of an adopted child must research the sins of the 'biological parents,' confessing them and casting the consequences off the child. He says:

Causes of Conflicts—

1. Adopted children are affected by the sins of their natural parents, and these sins are usually very severe.

Steps to Resolve Conflicts—

1. If the child is too young to understand, pray for the child. Confess your sins and acknowledge the sins of the natural parents. Ask God to rebuke Satan and free the child from any unbelief or rebellion from the lives of the parents. Pray in the name

Then he goes on to say that if the adopted child is old enough, "Explain that just as physical weaknesses are passed down through parents, so are spiritual weaknesses such as pride, lust and rejection (see Exodus 20:5)." He then tips his hat to Exodus 20:6 and Ezekiel 18:20. But if these verses apply what need is there of the "Step to Resolve the Conflict" in the first place? No such exorcistic ritual is ever hinted at anywhere in the Bible.

Whether ours by birth or by adoption, our children must be brought up under the consistent, continued, corrective, instructive discipline of the Word of God. There are no 'quick fixes' for their sins and lapses. There are consequences of Adam's sin, but grace, salvation and progressive sanctification are the scriptural antidote. Helpful information on adoption of children, certainly more practical and reliable, can be obtained from Christian agencies working in this area of ministry.

An interesting inconsistency is found in the previously mentioned *Men's Manual* in a footnote on page 54 where Gothard mentions Adam Clarke. He calls the English Methodist one of the "greatest Bible teachers of the nineteen [sic] century" whom God rewarded by opening his spiritual understanding to "hidden wisdom and threads of truth in the Bible." Is it interesting to note what Clarke says of Exodus 20:5, which is a far cry from Gothard's view. With such a high endorsement of a man who was totally Arminian and believed in "second blessing" teaching (as well as loss of salvation), one wonders where Bill Gothard really stands doctrinally. But as to Exodus 20:5 Clarke says: "visiting the iniquity of the Fathers upon the children. *This necessarily implies—if the children walk in the steps of their fathers*; for no man can be condemned by Divine justice for a crime of which he was never guilty; see Ezekiel 18. *Idolatry* is however particularly intended, and visiting sins of this kind refers *principally to national judgments*. By withdrawing the Divine protection the idolatrous Israelites were delivered up into the hands of their enemies, from whom the gods in whom they trusted could not deliver them. This God did to the third and fourth generations, i.e. *successively*; as may be seen in every part of the Jewish history . . . These national judgments thus continue from generation to generation, appear to be what are designed by the words in the text, visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children"" (emphasis mine.)

Whatever one thinks of Clarke's exegesis, it is clear that it does not agree with Gothard's view. Clarke's reference to Ezekiel 18 is crucial to this issue.

with Gothard's view. Clarke's reference to Ezekiel 18 is crucial to this issue. Ezekiel 18:20-22 says, "The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him. But if the wicked will turn from all his sins that he hath committed and keep all my statutes, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall surely live and not die. All his transgressions that he hath committed, they shall not be mentioned unto him: In his righteousness that he hath done he shall live." All of this was an answer to those who were saying that sons in some way personally bore the iniquity of their fathers (v. 19). Germane as well is Jeremiah 31:29-30: "In those days they shall say no more, the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge. But everyone shall die for his own iniquity: every man that eateth the sour grape, his teeth shall be set on edge."

5. *His naive attempt to impose ancient cultural patterns on the church*

Understanding of this problem assumes some acquaintance with Bill Gothard's family materials and the consequences that flow logically from his teachings. The Bible records various kinds of family and cultural patterns. Abraham was a bedouin, David a shepherd and Gideon a farmer. In Scripture one encounters polygamy (multiple marriages), endogamy (marriages within a family), planned marriages, large extended families (inclusion of all the immediate relatives in a home), as well as a strong emphasis on the patriarchal and patrilineal modes.

We must take note of the important basic hermeneutical principle, apparently unknown to Gothard, that *not everything reported in the Bible is necessarily commanded*. Recorded, biblical history is not automatically commandment. It is clear from Mr. Gothard's family materials that he actually operates on the principle that certain cultural modes are more biblical and more necessary than others. He can point to examples in the Old Testament, but his examples are selective and purely subjective, given the variety of models in Old Testament times. His arbitrary method of choosing examples of cultural forms leaves one accepting Gothard's word for what is important since the Scripture gives no principles for the acceptance or rejection of any one cultural mode.

Mr. Gothard generally recreates a modified extended family concept with large doses of the patriarchal model. He suggests that, unless they have parental consent, adult single children should remain at home and that married couples should exercise what seems to be excessive dependence on the

counsel of their parents (even if the parents are unsaved and in spite of Psalm 1.) Extended families and a patriarchal structure are not necessarily commanded by God, no matter how many instances of them are reported in the Old Testament. Jesus did not live at home and there is no record that He ever had to get Mary's permission to leave. Jesus' comment that the husband and wife must *leave* father and mother, which involves more than just physical leaving, is certainly suggestive that the neolocal and nuclear family is *the* New Testament model.

The relationship of adult single people to parents, as well as the continuing relationship of a married couple to parents, is quite a bit more flexible and unstructured than the 'black and white' of Gothard's system. In fact, given all the personal dynamics involved, the area seems gray. At best, the exact relationship of the marriage structure of the Old Testament to the church is a very debatable issue and should not be made a test of spirituality or orthodoxy. Nowhere in Scripture are converts with previously established Greek or Roman family structures required to conform to a Hebrew norm. Would it be wrong for a 25 year-old son to go to seminary if his unsaved parents objected? Anyone familiar with Gothard's teaching knows Gothard would say, "Yes." Are there pat answers? Does Psalm 1 in terms of ungodly counsel apply? At one point Jesus' family objected to His ministry, but He didn't let that stop Him (cf. His rejection of a family meeting in Mark 3:31-34.)

Gothard's personal and unique views on singleness seem to have led to the sex scandal that rocked (and almost wrecked) his organization by way of his brother's repeated and prolonged immorality with secretaries of the organization, which Gothard admitted in his letter to pastors, July 18, 1980: "For many years I have put the ministry ahead of my family and staff, especially my brother. My pride and wrong priorities resulted in encouraging him to postpone marriage because of the demands of the ministry, thus disregarding his personal needs. I have also failed others, including present and former staff members who sought to warn me of my incomplete handling of past staff problems, rejecting reproofs, and personal inconsistencies." However, he has not recalled any of his materials!

6. *His dogmatic assertions on arbitrary matters*

In another set of Gothard notes there is a page titled, "How to Make Your Worship Service a Source of Scriptural Power;" under that, the subheading, "God's Order." Again note—God's order! So we are to believe that to have power in our worship services the order of worship to be strictly followed is as stated:

1. Enter with praise
2. Give sermon first
3. Confirm message with singing and testimonies
4. Examine self with Communion
5. Unite in righteous prayer
6. Conclude with the offering."

We note that nowhere is this called a suggested order of worship, but is called *God's order*. How can one state this is God's order? There is no specific order of worship spelled out in the New Testament. Am I to believe that by not following this order the church I pastor will have little or no spiritual power? By not following what is called *God's order* am I disobedient to God? Obviously all of these elements are mentioned in Scripture, but never in any particular order either by direct statement or example. How does one presume to know *God's order* when it isn't in Scripture? It is presumptuous for Gothard to dogmatize where God's Word is silent.

Frances Schaeffer has struggled with the forms and freedoms of the local church. Schaeffer says, "our forefathers understood . . . when they spoke of the fact that the church's authority was administrative and declarative. It meant that in the area of doctrine and in the area of conduct, the church has a right to bind other people's conscience only here it could show that the principle was derived from an open exegesis of Scripture.

"We must speak where the Scripture has spoken. But let us notice that we must also respect its silences. Within every form, there is freedom. Whether one is painting a picture, or dealing with a sociological problem, or raising a child, it is the same. The formation of a school and the order in a school rests [*sic*] on the balance of form and freedom. I would suggest that where the Scripture is silent, it indicates a freedom within the Scriptural form.

"God could have added one more chapter to the book of Acts and given us much more detail. He did not. We surely cannot say the Bible is mistaken. We must believe not only that what is said is—by God's will and inspiration—final, but also that where there is silence we are granted freedom under the leadership of the Holy Spirit."

Schaeffer then goes on to say, "Community and polity stand together. But within this double form, there are freedoms in which the Holy Spirit may lead different people at different times, different congregations thereby meeting different needs." After giving some illustrations, he concludes with these helpful words: "Many evangelicals and conservatives tend to be low-church

people. That is, very often they speak out against those who have any formalized form of liturgy. But in reality the low-church evangelical has his own form of liturgy which is often absolutely unchangeable. It is inconceivable to move the service from 10:00 to 10:45 or from morning to afternoon, or to change the order of the service, or to consider having the pastor stand in a privileged position only once on Sunday, rather than twice—to preach on Sunday morning, but answer questions Sunday night. You have all sorts of possibilities. There should be different kinds of services at different places and at different times. Let us be thankful there is a given form. Then let us be careful to make sure we are not bound by unbiblical forms, by forms to which we have become used and which have no absolute place in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. In regard to the polity and practice of the church, except for the clearly given biblical norms, every other detail is open to negotiation among God's people under the leadership of the Holy Spirit."

To make dogmatic assertions on arbitrary matters of freedom is to fall into the errors Schaeffer is warning against. I am concerned that The Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts is no longer a para-church organization helping Christians with some areas of Christian living, but is in fact becoming a *system*. This system covers counseling, ministry, home, family, worship, church structure, divorce, adoption, dating, even hiring a church secretary! A whole church ministry program can be set up with a minister's manual.¹⁴ Some of that system Mr. Gothard suggests should be introduced into the church as curriculum (See *Rebuilder's Guide*, pages 221 & 222, Chapter 7, *Begin Through the Church*.) Gothard also instructs fathers to teach the *Men's Manual* to the family as family curriculum (page 6).

There are more problem areas, but I leave those to others. In conclusion, I want to say again that not everything Mr. Gothard teaches is suspect. However, "a little leaven leavens the whole lump." When Gothard speaks where the Scripture is silent and is dogmatic on questionable interpretations he becomes a law unto himself; the thinking Christian must be aware of it and properly critical and discerning. Mr. Gothard would do better to stay with his strong area of basic seminars and refuse to pontificate on every issue. He should also open his organization to outside, independent scrutiny.

Heresy doesn't have to start with a major leap; it may begin with a leaning, a trend that moves off center just a bit. Certainly Mr. Gothard doesn't intend to confuse and divide, but I have seen his followers make areas mentioned above a test of orthodoxy and their fellowship with others has been

destroyed. Everyone needs to be scrutinized when he presumes to speak for God, including this writer. My hope is that what is written here may cause us all to be more discerning and more diligent in our understanding of God's truth. Let's accept the good, but beware of some of the dangers.

The words of Charles Bridges are filled with godly wisdom and we do well to ponder them:

The novelties of fancy, accredited by some favourite name, readily pass for the revelation of God. But here men are ready to drink any cup that is presented to them, like children, who think everything good that is sweet. Errors, never solitary, are built upon some partial, insulated, or perverted truth . . . carefully ponder whom we follow. Sift the most plausible pretensions (1 Thessalonians 5:21, 1 John 4:10). Never set a great name against the Divine testimony. Admit only the one standard; like the noble Bereans, who would not believe even an Apostle's word except it was conformed by the written testimony (Acts 17:11)."

FOOTNOTES

¹Bockelman, Wilfred, *Gothard, the Man and His Ministry: An Evaluation* (Santa Barbara, California, Quill Publications, 1976).

²*Ibid.*, page 83. Note: Bockelman also says on page 140: "I also feel that many of the things he says are also very close to the borderline of leading people to bondage rather than freedom."

³Crater, Tim, "Bill Gothard's View of the Exception Clause", *The Journal of Pastoral Practice*, Vol. 4 No. 3, (Phillipsburg, N.J., Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), pages 5-12.

⁴Adams, Jay, *Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible*, (Phillipsburg, N.J., Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), pages 55-59.

⁵*Rebuilder's Guide*, (Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts, 1982), page 58.

⁶Ryrie, Charles, *Biblical Teaching on Divorce and Remarriage* (Used by permission I.B.Y.C. U.S.A., 1981).

⁷*Men's Manual* (Oak Brook, Illinois, Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts, Inc., 1979), page 89.

⁸Gothard, Bill, *Supplementary Alumni Booklet, Conquering Impossible Mountains*, Vol. 9 (I.B.Y.C., 1983), page 15.

⁹Gothard, Bill, *Ten Reasons Why Adopted Children Tend to Have More Conflicts* (Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts, U.S.A., 1982), pages 1 & 2.

¹⁰Clarke, Adam, *Clarke's Commentary* Vol. 1, (New York-Nashville, Abingdon Press, No Date), pages 402-403.

¹¹*Christianity Today*, August 8, 1980, "Bill Gothard Steps Down During Institute Shakeup", pages 46 & 47.

¹²Gothard, Bill, *Men's Institute Curriculum*, (Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts, 1980), page 2.

¹³Schaeffer, Francis A., *The Church at the End of the 20th Century* (Downers Grove, Ill., Inter-Varsity Press, 1970), pages 74-77.

¹⁴Gothard, Bill, *The Basic Church Ministry, How to Solve Perplexing Church Problems* (Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts, U.S.A., 1979).

¹⁵Bridges, Charles, *A Commentary on Proverbs* (London, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1968), page 180.

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