

The Gothard Institutes

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Bill Gothard ironically is a controversial figure, contrary to his publicly known amicable personality. The controversy is not between Gothard and his opponents, however, but between the disciples of Gothard and those who question his theology and methodology. He personally remains aloof to involvement in public controversy and to open discussion regarding his views.

Gothard is not a Southern Baptist. Reportedly he was ordained in the LeGrange Bible Church in suburban Chicago.¹ This fact of itself would cause Baptists to inquire of his frame of reference. It would not necessarily mean rejection of Gothard by Baptists. Even if he were a Baptist, it would not guarantee acceptance by other Baptists. Gothard does, however, affect Baptists because many attend his seminars. It would be irresponsible of Baptist leadership not to examine Gothard's teachings. Such an examination could erroneously be considered as defensiveness toward a non-Baptist ministry.

Denominational orientation does affect a person's doctrine, polity, and methodology. Hobbs and Mullins point up a distinction that significantly relates to this subject. They wrote that the soul's competency in religion under God is the historical significance of the Baptists.² Competency of the soul or soul liberty means that each individual has free access to God for himself. This relates to experiencing salvation, prayer, Bible study, seeking God's will for one's own life, personal responsibility, and personal relationships with other Christians. Soul competency is the theological premise for congregational church government.

Congregational government necessitates open dialogue. No one person can presume to speak for others. Where Gothard would reject open discussion as contrary to "God's way," Baptists have enthusiastically claimed that this is "God's way."³ Hobbs and Mullins say: "The decisions of the local congregation on ecclesiastical matters are the 'consensus of the competent.'"⁴

The question would naturally arise, does this relationship based on soul competency include church, family, business, and government? How would it relate to Gothard's chain of command? While Baptists acknowledge a place of authority in personal relationships, they feel that no one should assume a role of authoritarianism over another Christian. People should be encouraged by their leaders in family, church, business, or government to realize the full potential of experiencing God's personal leadership for themselves. This in essence is the Gospel of the Kingdom of God, that individuals can experience God's will personally. Each should aspire to experience God's will on earth even as in heaven. The most successful parent is not the one who has succeeded in gaining complete obedience from his or her child, but rather the one who has led a child to personally know and obey God's will for himself. There is a distinct difference between the authoritarianism inherent in the chain of command and the authoritative responsibilities of those in leadership.

In addition to this theological difference between Gothard and Baptists, there are differences on the interpretation of Scripture. But among Baptists themselves there are differences on the interpretation of Scripture. The significant point here is that Baptists would be open to discussion of these Scriptures. The

Statement of Faith of the Institute In Basic Youth Conflicts would be favorably received by Baptists as an interpretation of Scripture. But Baptists have formulated their statements of faith through open discussion.

Gothard, I feel, would have a real problem with open discussion. His views are so systematized that openness and dialogue would be threatening. A divine order, simply arranged, is essential to his system.

The system focuses on another matter of concern. A closed system with one spokesman, contrary to the competency stance of Baptists, subjects everybody to following one leader. So is Gothard to be "Paul," "Apollos," or "Cephas?" Why not just follow Jesus with everyone having access to him? The problem is not with Paul, Apollos, or Cephas, but it is with people ascribing cultic qualities to a man.

The system is a key to Gothard's success in discipling masses of people. It is a phenomenal experience when several thousand people of varying ages gather to listen for hours to one man's lecture. Apparently for some people the size of the crowds attending the seminars demonstrates the approval of God and accredits Gothard's views and system. Gothard provides a neat package of how relationships are supposed to work with an abundance of Scripture quotations (not much exegesis) supported primarily by success stories. There is a subjective interpretation and a second guessing of God's actions that others are expected to receive as objective truth. I think that most Baptists who are aware of their heritage would say, "If renouncing soul liberty is the price for success in gathering masses of church members to hear lectures, you can forget it!"

Like Gothard there are a few Baptists who have assumed an authority role in the interpretation of "God's way." They are very much involved in current controversies among Baptists. But aside from this, the biblical and cultural doctrines espoused by Gothard are voiced from many Baptist pulpits. The difference is that individual views are not like Gothard's: systematized, packaged, and distributed in a manner that is essential to the survival of a religious business. To this extent individual freedom has been discarded for the sake of uniformity, pragmatism, and success.

The success, simplicity, order, and ready answer to personal relationships in solving life's problems are welcomed by people caught up in the complexities and frustrations of current times. Gothard offers help to many people in this setting. And Gothardism, like the Charismatic Movement, Fundamentalism, and Liberalism, flourishes in an era when loyalty to a denominational heritage is secondary to current experience and pragmatic solutions.

Gothard is a controversial figure. Possibly this happens mostly because a closed system invites criticism from afar since there is no open discussion up close. And the consequential question would be, "Could the 'system' survive if open discussion prevailed?" If the institution were discontinued, is it possible that Gothard would then become just another Christian minister?

Notes

¹Wilfred Bockleman, *GOTHARD The Man And His Ministry: An Evaluation* (Santa Barbara: Quill Publications, 1976), p. 32.

²Herschel H. Hobbs and E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1978), p. 48.

³Ibid., pp. 21-27.

⁴Ibid., p. 49.