

***Will the Theologians Please Sit Down* by David Bercot**

Book Review and Critique by Barbara Buzzard

Professor Bercot's premise is this: "When Christianity was young, the focus was on Jesus Christ and His kingdom — not theology."¹ He makes the point that the things now considered essential to the faith have grown to a long list, many of these unknown to the early Christians. The story as he sees it is this: "Theologians took over the church. Once the theologians took over, the emphasis changed from godly *fruit* to 'orthodox' theology...It was primarily the religious authorities who opposed the kingdom of God in Jesus' day, and it has been that way ever since."² And so Bercot considers today's theologians an elite class who have set themselves up as interpreters of Scripture but deny this right to others; and worse: they create a war of words and use them to fight against the "children of the kingdom."

The Leaven of the Theologians

Bercot denounces Jewish theologians because he sees them as trying to create a way to God that didn't require godly fruit. "They had corrupted the Law and had taken away 'the key of knowledge' from the common people. The theologians had made the people totally dependent on them for access to the Scriptures and to the knowledge of God. But then they blocked the way to the kingdom. They produced no kingdom fruit themselves, and they hindered others from producing fruit as well."³ The removal of the key of knowledge was the devastating removal of the key of the kingdom.

Bercot places much blame on the Pharisees and Sadducees as he believes that they missed the whole purpose and spirit of the Law and thereby negated God's commandments and took the Scriptures away from the people. "The sum total of the scribes and Pharisees' human commandments, commentary, interpretations, hypocrisy and spiritual elitism constituted the leaven Jesus told us to beware of. The weight of the theologians' leaven crushed the whole spirit and purpose of the Law. The Scriptures in themselves became useless, because they only meant whatever the theologians said they meant...For in the end, the Jewish theologians had made the Scriptures invalid because of their traditions. The theologians controlled what the people learned about God and His dealings with man. Yet, they were themselves in utter darkness."⁴

The Major Turning Point in Christian History

This event was the Council of Nicaea. And why was it even more momentous than the Reformation or the events of Acts? Because it was there decided that "the Scriptures were simply inadequate. The council must go *beyond* Scripture if it was going to force the Arians out of the church...But to do this, he had to insert language in the creed that is not found in Scripture."⁵

"So the winners at Nicaea were saying that Scripture alone is not adequate to settle disputes. They were also saying that the Bible doesn't fully explain or define certain matters that we *need* to know...The word heretic — which originally meant a schismatic person — now came to mean a person who held to a defined theological error. And heretics were painted as the embodiment of evil. In short, Christianity had become Doctrinarianity."⁶ This is a clever saying, but would it be just a step too far to say that this is the Christianity that isn't? We can see its flaws clearly; we can see where it went wrong. We can tell by its persecutory impulse that it is not following Jesus. So why do we continue to regard it as the real thing?

And so began a time of theologians ruling — by language bullying, and by the creation of an elite class of official Scripture interpreters. And so began group think and herd mentality within the Church. And so began heresy hunting. And so we have inherited a system which blended Christianity and Greek philosophy, a system that the early church would not even recognize. Bercot emphasizes over and over again that it is

¹ David Bercot, *Will the Theologians Please Sit Down*, p. 7.

² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 25.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 73,74.

by our fruit that we will be judged, and yet *the system* says that unless you say this, unless you subscribe to this formula (though non-Scriptural) you are not a Christian. How very interesting to note that after Nicaea when people were tortured, burned alive, imprisoned, etc. it was never because their lives displayed *bad fruit*, but because they had *beliefs* which were contrary to *the system*.

Us and Them

“Please note that Jesus didn’t tell His disciples that some of *you* will put your fellow Christians to death, thinking you’re doing God an act of service. . . . So it is never the disciples of Christ who do the killing. They are the ones being killed. . . . Real Christians are the ones who are persecuted. They’re never the ones who do the persecuting (Phil. 1:29).”⁷ This is a wonderful and useful truth to have in your arsenal — to be activated when in doubt about who’s who. And perhaps we should be reminded of this on a daily basis, with cult hunters on the lookout and name-calling prolific.

“From the very beginning, Christians had always renounced war, violence, and killing of every sort. However, within a few years after Nicaea, Christians began joining the army. At first, ‘Christians’ only warred against pagans, but before the century was over, ‘Christians’ were slaughtering fellow ‘Christians.’”⁸ I wonder why Bercot doesn’t recommend using this as a test (or at least one of) to see where the real Christians are. This would be most enlightening to his readers and perhaps to himself as well, i.e. what group of believers actually follow Jesus on this issue?

Gutting the Sermon on the Mount

“By the time these theologians got through with the Sermon on the Mount, the radical teachings in it had become meaningless [for example, Christians *should* go to war; *don’t* turn the other cheek]...Imagine! With their lips the Nicene theologians exalted Jesus as highly as possible. But in reality, they gutted His teachings, corrupted His kingdom, murdered others, and altered the historic faith handed down to them.”⁹

If anyone wants an education regarding Luther, this is the book. Bercot calls him a wolf in sheep’s clothing. “Luther’s real zeal was not a zeal for the kingdom of God. Rather, it was a zeal for doctrines — his doctrines.” Bercot charges that Luther’s zeal murdered the person of Christ — by murdering Christ’s brothers. “If anyone would teach that Christ is not God, but a mere man, and like other prophets, as the Turks and Anabaptists hold — such teachers should not be tolerated, but punished as blasphemers. For they are not mere heretics, but open blasphemers.”¹⁰

“Here Luther surpassed in audacity every theologian who had preceded him. He said a Christian can know ‘all that is necessary and good’ about Christ without ever reading the three Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Really?”¹¹ (Odd since those Gospels contain the bulk of his teachings!) But, says Luther with outrageous arrogance, go to Paul. This would have stunned the second-century Christians, but Luther got away with it as is shown by the fact that many follow his pattern today — of placing Paul above Jesus.¹² Both Calvin and Luther were control freaks and bullies, says Bercot. Those who try to defend them find that they can’t trace the doctrines of these men back to the Apostles.

Blinding Danger Where You Never Imagined It

“From the very beginning, study Bibles have always worked to obscure the kingdom of God and the teachings of Christ. Sometimes they’re subtle, and at other times they make a bold frontal attack on the kingdom. The Geneva Bible hid the kingdom of God by telling its readers that *Jesus instituted nothing revolutionary with His teaching*. According to the Geneva Bible, *there is no difference between Christ’s*

⁷ Ibid., p. 80.

⁸ Ibid., p. 82.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 86, 89.

¹⁰ Martin Luther, *Exposition on Psalm 82*.

¹¹ *Will the Theologians Please Sit Down*, p. 105.

¹² Luther wrote prefaces for each book in the NT, telling his readers what the writer was “really saying” and trying to skew their opinions.

moral teachings and the Law of Moses.”¹³ And by this method we were blinded to the radical teaching of Jesus and the radical revolution it inspired and ignited. Calvin and Luther taught that we are still under the same moral law as that of the Old Covenant, failing to see the obvious contradictions between those teachings and the teachings of Jesus. Who *were* these men who *missed* Jesus and his radical and unlike-any-other message?

“What about loving our enemies? Calvin skillfully wiped out this teaching of Jesus as well: Calvin: ‘It is obvious, as I have already said, that *Christ does not introduce new laws.*’” Thus Calvin sidestepped what Jesus said, and used the excuse that war was allowable under the Law and therefore was still allowable to Christians. Surely this poses a profound dilemma to searching Christians who must ask themselves: Who am I listening to/following?

Bullying Is as Old as the Pharisees

And by illustration of the plea in Bercot’s book title he says that “Christian theologians have an even worse track record than the scribes and Pharisees.” Bercot actually entitles one of his chapters “Learning to Stand Up to Theological Bullies.” He says, “In the end, the theological bullies have largely had their way. From what I’ve observed, we kingdom Christians often are weak when it comes to evangelism. That’s because keeping quiet has been deeply etched into our collective psyche. We’ve thrown out the bulk of our forefathers’ teachings and replaced them with the doctrines of those who have bullied us. When a person reads the typical doctrinal textbooks of today’s Anabaptists, Moravians, Brethren, and other kingdom Christians, he or she finds that they basically teach the doctrines of Athanasius, Augustine, Luther, and Calvin — with mere additions of nonresistance, free will, and the head covering.”¹⁴

Anyone honest about Luther must admit that there was a very dark side to him. Consider this example: “I, Martin Luther, slew all the peasants in the rebellion, for I said that they should be slain. All their blood is upon my head. But I cast it on the Lord God, who commanded me to speak in this way.”¹⁵ *Luther’s orders were followed, slaughtering up to 100,000 peasants without mercy.*

Once Saved, Always Saved

“Luther’s murderous and hate-filled spirit was the fruit of his own teaching. He vainly imagined: ‘No sin can separate us from Him, even if we were to kill or commit adultery thousands of times per day.’”¹⁶ This thinking and this man were enemies of the Gospel Jesus preached. Tragically, this “once saved, always saved” doctrine continues to blind and distort and poison minds.

And Calvin ordered the torture and death of many who opposed him, singularly Michael Servetus who was burned alive. These men who are guilty of monstrous deeds are still hailed by the Church as heroes. This alone should cause one to shudder.

Fact or Fiction?

We have all been taught that there are three Greek words for love (*eros*, *philia*, and *agape*) but that one of them has a special meaning — that *agape* love is the *highest* form of love, unconditional love that comes from the holy spirit alone. It turns out not to be true! This claim that *agape* (used 283 times from Gen. to Rev.) is a higher selfless love can be shown to be fictitious:

- “Then make me savory food, such as I *love*” (Gen. 27:4).
- “How long will you *love* what is worthless?” (Ps. 4:2b)
- “Those who hate me *love* death” (Prov. 8:36).
- “Shame on you Pharisees! For you *love* the best seats...” (Luke 11:43).
- “They *loved* the approval of men” (John 12:43).

¹³ *Will the Theologians Please Sit Down*, p. 107, emphasis added.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

¹⁵ Dollinger, *The Reformation*, Vol. 1, p. 289, quoted in Schaff.

¹⁶ *Will the Theologians Please Sit Down*, p. 180. Note that Bercot softened Luther’s language here as it is too vulgar to print.

Plus many more examples in Scripture. Bercot maintains that theologians are often copycats; thus it is that error survives and is promoted as truth.

Even as I write this an email has just arrived stating: “**Agape**: This Greek word is used to describe a high form of love. Similar to the Hebrew *hesed*, agape is often used to refer to the covenantal love between God and His people. Agape love is an unconditional, universal and unbreakable love that will be there regardless of changes in circumstances or feelings.”

If this were true, *agape* could not be used in the examples given. Someone has not done their homework. May we all spy the lie.

Kingdom Christians, Kingdom Gospel, But Not a Kingdom Hope

“The kingdom gospel was the mainline predominant gospel in the second and third centuries...Although the theologians shoved the kingdom gospel out of the mainstream of institutional Christianity in the fourth century...The kingdom gospel can be traced back to the beginning because it’s truly the historic faith.”¹⁷

“With their lips the Nicene theologians exalted Jesus as highly as possible. But in reality, they didn’t hesitate to contradict His very words. They gutted His teachings, corrupted His kingdom, murdered others, and altered the historic faith handed down to them...Christianity was so thoroughly corrupted that it bore only a faint resemblance to the Christianity of the apostolic age.”¹⁸

“When I say that most theologians are clueless when it comes to historic Christianity, I mean they are totally out of touch with what Christianity originally represented...Let me suggest that it’s not the unlettered and ordinary Christians who lived so close to the apostles who got things mixed up. Rather it’s today’s church and its theologians who have things mixed up.”¹⁹

Two all-pervading questions Bercot puts to his readers: *What common ground is there between Jesus and your beliefs, your church, your favored theologians? And how and where have we been deceived?* I fear that ordinary churchgoers are not used to being challenged in this manner. But the wise will heed. I think that all pastors should read the book, if only to be aware of the fragile and tenuous link to Jesus that orthodoxy has. And all lay people should read it so that they can make a wise choice as to who to believe.

But as with anything, we must proceed with caution. After Bercot introduces us to so many thought provoking and challenging ideas for which I am enormously grateful, it is with much perplexity and sadness that I must add the following caveat: Bercot speaks of kingdom living, kingdom principles, being a child of the kingdom, and especially kingdom fruit, all of which we must do and have. Yes, in a sense we enter the Kingdom once converted. And yes, it is good to be reminded of the sort of lives we are meant to lead. Tragically, though, he does not see the Kingdom as a future event in any way. This destroys our Kingdom Hope and wipes out the Scriptures that promise that Jesus will inaugurate the Kingdom at his return. By far the vast majority of Kingdom references (perhaps as many as 95%) refer to that future great event, our blessed hope. And it is *because* of that blessed hope that we can run the race. “This hope is our spiritual anchor; it is both certain and reliable” (Heb. 6:19).

We know that Joseph of Arimathea (who asked Pilate for Jesus’ body) was still waiting for the Kingdom to come (Mark 15:43). And we know that Jesus is not sitting on the throne in Jerusalem. We know that Satan is not bound and that he continues to deceive the entire world. We know that the saints are not ruling the world as they are destined to do (1 Cor. 6:2; Dan. 7:27). All of that is yet to come with Jesus’ arrival to restore, to rectify, to bless and to heal (Acts 1:6; 3:21). All of the “until” texts in Scripture will be fulfilled in this long awaited and longed for coming of our Messiah to usher in his Father’s Kingdom. ✧

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 172.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 89.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 166, 167.