



THINK ON THESE THINGS

Philippians 4:8

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What Is The Big Picture?

By KEITH BARCLAY

Looking over our history how would many view us? What one word might those who have witnessed our movement use to describe us? There was a time when “biblical” would have been an immediate answer. We were known as people of “the book.” As time progressed I began to hear “warring” and “divisive” as terms frequently used to describe “church of Christ people.”

I can only speak for myself but the shift disturbed me. I began to consider why such a shift took place. Initially, I said the fault rested at the feet of the onlookers making such pronouncements. They did not understand the importance of truth. They were willing to tolerate error and their compassion was misplaced. Surely the benefit of the doubt ought to go to genuine disciples not those who are on the outside viewing us with a bias from the outset. But are we immune from our own biases?

Is it possible that we lose sight of the forest for the trees? Could it be that our dedication to “the book” caused us to take a track that led to perpetual conflict rather than to the Christ? Yes, the book is the only way to the Christ and He was one who did not shy away from conflict and neither should we. My concern is that we (generic, painting with a broad brush “we”) do not know how to function without conflict. When we no longer can find someone outside the “borders of the kingdom” to engage, we begin to look inside our own barracks for someone with which to battle.

All of this ought to concern us in light of the fact that we are told in scripture that the big picture is peace. Peace with God and, as a result, peace with one another. Note Peter’s sermon in Acts 10 to Cornelius and his household. A vital aspect of that sermon is found in Acts 10:34-36: “So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand

*And Why Do
We Have Such A
Hard Time
Seeing
It?*

that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all)” [ESV].

As Peter sets out to prove that the Gentiles are to be included he tells us that God shows no partiality. This is demonstrated by a message preached. Who preached that message? God (v.36). What was the focal point of the message? Peace (v.36). What was the message? Maybe better asked, who was the message? Jesus (v.36). God came preaching peace through Christ Jesus.

This should not surprise us. Note Ephesians 2:14-16: “For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility” [ESV].

Jesus tells us that the pivotal point in His listing of the Beatitudes is not the eighth, being persecuted, but the seventh, be-

ing peacemakers (Matt. 5:9). We are not “called the sons of God” until it can be said of us that we are peacemakers. The preceding characteristics are essential for us to be peacemakers and persecution (Matt. 5:10ff) is what will follow those who make for peace.

Paul told the Roman believers (20-25 years after Peter spoke to Cornelius) that the big picture was still peace. Romans 14:17: “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” Romans 14:19: “So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.” And as a result it is incumbent upon me to... “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom. 12:18).

So if we are going to have conflict, I must do everything in my power to make certain that it is not my fault!

Now, it is important to recognize that this peace came with a price. It was the price of the blood of Jesus. And to maintain this peace may require the shedding of blood (cf. Matt. 5:10ff). But as with the case of Jesus, if blood is to be shed, it is not to be the blood of others. I should not be amused by or salivate at the scent of others’ blood. I should attempt every means possible to secure peace before pulling my sword to do battle. Maybe we have witnessed too many westerns or shoot ‘em up police action movies. It seems that some among us like to shoot and ask questions later. If I have understood the big picture correctly I (we) cannot afford to operate with this mentality.

Acts 4:13 concludes in this way, “And they recognized that they had been with Jesus” [ESV]. That is what I hope would be said of all who wear His name. That will happen when we become God’s peacemakers.

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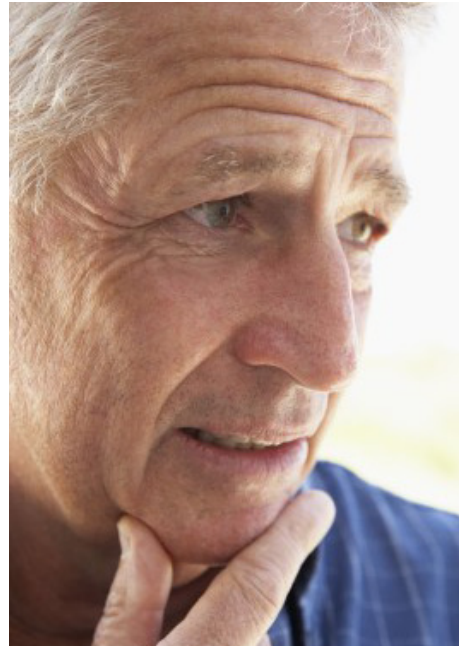
When His Will Is Not Mine

By RICK LIGGIN

There is no doubt that it was always Jesus' intention to do the will of His Father! At Sychar, after His visit with the Samaritan woman, Jesus made it clear that His "food" was to do His Father's will and accomplish His work (Jn. 4:34). After healing a lame man at the pool of Bethesda, Jesus affirmed that He didn't act on His own initiative or seek His own will, but the will of His Father (Jn. 5:30). And again, after feeding the five thousand, Jesus affirmed in His "Bread of Life" sermon that He had not come down out of heaven to do His own will, but the will of the One who sent Him (Jn. 6:38). Even at the last supper, as Jesus spoke to His disciples, He affirmed His absolute commitment to obeying the commands of His Father (Jn. 14:30-31).

But just because Jesus always wanted to do the Father's will doesn't mean that His will was always consistent with His Father's. If you think differently, take another look at the Garden of Gethsemane on the night Jesus was betrayed (Matt. 26:36-46).

When Jesus arrived in the garden that night, the atmosphere suddenly became even more serious. Almost instantly there was a sense of stress, dread, and trepidation in Jesus' mood that was visibly apparent to His disciples. The text actually says, "He began to be grieved and distressed" (26:37); and Jesus even verbally admitted that this was so (26:38). Jesus knew what time it was: He knew that the time was very near for His arrest, trial, and excruciating execution. He knew that before this day was over He would be dead, having endured the agonizing torment of Roman crucifixion. And although He had known all along, even before He left heaven, that this was where His path would ultimately lead, when Jesus actually came face to face with the reality of the cross, its horror exceeded even His expectation. He began to



be deeply grieved and distressed almost "to the point of death" (26:37-38).

And that's when Jesus prayed: "My Father, if it is possible let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will" (26:39). Three times He similarly prayed in this agonizing way (26:42-44); and these prayers reinforce the fact that actually coming face to face with the reality of the cross moved our Lord to admit His own fleshly will: He really wanted a way out. The human part of Him really didn't want to go to the cross! In this moment, Jesus' will was not His Father's! And that's when the real test came! It is in that moment that our eternal salvation in a way almost hung in the balance! Would Jesus do His own will in that moment or would He surrender His will to the will of the Father? Would He resist or would He yield?

Well, you know the answer to that! Our salvation wasn't ever really in any jeopardy! We know this, because: even though Jesus admitted that this "cup" was not what He wanted, He was still willing to surrender His will to the Father's! Jesus was willing to yield...to obey His Father's will, even when His own flesh, in deep distress, was crying out, "No!"

And folks, that's when Jesus "learned obedience" in a very practical way...in a way that truly "perfected" (or completed) His character (Heb. 5:7-9). As obedient as Jesus had been before this event, He was yet imperfect: His obedience was yet incomplete! But in obeying the Father when His own will was different, that is when He was perfected; and "having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation" (5:9).

Now please listen to this: it is in Gethsemane that Jesus teaches us about real obedience...because the same thing is true for us! The real test of our obedience to the Father comes not when it's easy or when we agree with Him or when His will is ours. Doing His will when we agree with Him or when we want what He wants is easy. That's not the real test of obedience! The real test comes when His will is not ours; when we don't want to do what He wants!

I imagine most of us would probably say that we want to do the will of the Father! Like Jesus, it is our desire and our intent to do His will! But what happens to that intent when His will is not my will...when it's uncomfortable to obey or when it's really hard? Do I go ahead and do His will anyway, even though His will is not mine? Or do I resist? Obedience is learned when we don't want to do what God wants us to, but we do it anyway! When it's tough to do or uncomfortable to do, but we do it anyway; when my flesh screams, "no!" and even my desire screams, "no!", but I do it anyway: that's real obedience! And when I successfully obey His will, even though it's hard and even though I don't want to, that's when I begin to see how much I really want to serve God and do His will.

My biggest fear for myself and for some of us is that we obey God up to a point...as long as we agree with Him, as long as His will is the same as ours, or as long as our "flesh" doesn't want to violently rebel. But when doing His will makes us uncomfortable or goes opposite to what our bodies want, or to what our intellect agrees with, then we find a way to avoid obedience. Oh, we may not outright rebel! But what we often do in such cases is we find "a better way," a way to intellectually avoid doing His will or to justify not doing His will.

Jesus obeyed His Father's will despite the difficulty, despite the pain, and even despite the fact that in that moment He would really have rather found another way! And it is only because He went on and did (not His, but) the Father's will that He learned real obedience, and was exalted to be the author of our salvation.

Jesus is the source of salvation to those who obey Him...to those who "obey Him," only when it is easy or convenient, or when we agree, or when our flesh agrees? No. That's not real obedience. It's only when we obey like He obeyed: when we would really rather do something else, but we do His will anyway, that's when we really obey! And only that is when we will enjoy eternal salvation!

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THE BLAME GAME

By AL DIESTELKAMP

Shifting blame has been around from the very beginning. When confronted for his sin in the garden, Adam tried to use this tactic by saying, “The woman you gave me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate” (Gen. 3:12). Then when Eve was questioned, she tried to pass the blame on by saying, “the serpent deceived me, and I ate” (v.13).

Ever since, people have been playing the blame game in efforts to “excuse” sins and failures. Another well-known biblical example of the blame game happened at Mt. Sinai when Aaron, after he had personally “fashioned it with an engraving tool” (Ex. 32:4), tried to shift the responsibility for making the golden calf on “the people” (v.22-23).

Of course, it was futile for Adam and Eve to try to fool God with this ploy, and Moses didn’t buy Aaron’s story, but these examples haven’t deterred the practice that thrives to this day.

In every area of human behavior we see people trying to justify their actions by diverting attention away from themselves to someone or something else. “It’s not my fault!” is the claim.

In our nation’s current economic crisis we hear blame-shifting every day. Politicians on both sides of the aisle have mastered this tactic. Republicans say the economy hasn’t improved because of the policies of President Obama, Harry Reid and Nancy Pelosi, while Democrats lay the blame for almost everything on former President George W. Bush.

In the business world, union leaders and management accuse each other of greed, corruption and inflexibility. The problem is always the other’s fault.

Unfortunately, the blame game often shows up in people’s personal lives. Sin is sometimes excused by placing the blame at the feet of circumstances.

With drastic devaluation in the housing market some homeowners who find themselves “upside down” think they are justified in reneging on their agreed upon mortgage contracts by accusing the banks of “predatory lending.”

Many who find themselves in unhappy marriages feel justified in breaking their vows if they can point the finger of blame at their spouse.

Those involved in the various forms of sexual immorality will often try to lay blame at the feet of a spouse, or even resort to blaming God by saying, “He made me this way.”

The drunkard explains his “problem” as an illness, despite the fact that he “fashioned” himself with that disease by tak-

ing the first drink and ignoring the God-inspired warning that “Wine is a mocker, intoxicating drink arouses brawling, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise” (Prov. 20:1).

God, who always keeps His word, expects the same from His children (Matt.

5:37). He expects us to keep our promises, commitments and vows even when it would seem wise to “reconsider” them (Psa. 37:21). When a child of God sins He accepts no excuses or shifting of blame, but saves those with a contrite spirit (Psa. 34:18).

Incubation & Isolation

By DAVID DIESTELKAMP

When someone is sick there is a time for incubation and a time for isolation. If you incubate when you should isolate, things get worse (and others are negatively affected). If you isolate when you should incubate, the sickness in the individual will worsen without active treatment. The same is true spiritually. In most cases of treating spiritual sickness, scripture calls for incubation, rather than isolation. When I say incubation, I mean creating an environment that will help, strengthen, and comfort a spiritually sick person.

Now we exhort you, brethren, warn those who are unruly, comfort the fainthearted, uphold the weak, be patient with all

1 THESSALONIANS 5:14

Our assemblies are supposed to be times of incubation—encouragement, edification, focus, knowledge expansion, and provocations to love and good works (Heb. 10:24). Other healing and strengthening environments are created when we have times outside of assemblies where we study, pray and sing together. Additionally, individuals simply showing brotherly love in their actions and exercising hospitality in social activities can provide desperately needed nurturing.

Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality.

ROMANS 12:10-13

For incubation to occur everyone must cooperate. Those who are strong will need to not just please themselves, but sacrifice to help build up others (Rom. 15:1). And those who need incubation must make that known (confess—Jas. 5:16). The spiritually sick who are trying to recover must not be isolated or abandoned, and they must not isolate themselves, but take advantage of every incubation opportunity others and they can create (cf. Heb.10:24-25). Those who are weak and sick need to remember that incubation opportunities can be created and offered, but not forced—they must participate.

As with the physical, there are spiritual diseases which call for isolation. In cases of impenitence, sin is to be identified to the church (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:5) and they are to be avoided (Rom. 16:17), with social contact being severely restricted (1 Cor. 5:11). It is hoped that this isolation will cause the person to see the severity of their sickness, be ashamed (2 Thess. 3:14; have “godly sorrow”—2 Cor. 7:5); and repent to receive healing through forgiveness in Christ. However, an equally vital role of isolation is protection for others from the spread of spiritual disease.

Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

1 CORINTHIANS 5:6-8

The decision to incubate or isolate is a serious one. Often nothing is done and those who need nurturing grow weaker until they die, while those who need isolation are overcome in sin and take others with them into the world and error. Of course incubating someone who needs isolation will strengthen them in their sin, and isolating someone who needs incubation will wither what little faith they may still have. We need to thoughtfully and prayerfully approach each situation, creating the appropriate prescription.

Glorifying God While We Battle Sin

By **ANDY DIESTELKAMP**

Are you feeling it yet? Are you feeling the pressure to tolerate the homosexual lifestyle and having stabs of sympathy pains when some egregious case of mean-spirited discrimination (often involving children) hits the newswire? On the other hand, have you considered the inconsistency of mistreating homosexuals who flagrantly thumb their noses at scriptural principle while giving a pass to heterosexuals who do likewise?

Unfortunately, the response of many professing Christians to the rising tide of immorality is behavior that is not becoming the name of Christ. In their reaction to societal pressure, some have resorted to ugly behavior so as not to be thought "soft" on the practice of homosexuality. There is no evidence that the first century Christians verbally assaulted the ungodly and immoral with epithets or used other carnal tactics. The truth wielded by the cause of Christ is a mighty spiritual weapon. When we are frustrated that the worldly are so calloused as not to be pricked by its message, we must not resort to their weapons or methods of warfare (2 Cor. 10:3-5).

I am not at all suggesting that we give up even one inch of the moral high ground that

God's grace and truth have secured for us. On the contrary, I am suggesting that to return evil for evil is contrary to the marching orders we have received from our divine Commander (1 Pet. 3:8-12) and that to resort to such "talk radio" tactics reflects a lack of faith in God's way and imperils our cause. Frustration with the hard-hearted ungodliness that infects all levels of our culture is to be met with prayer, the characteristics of the fruit of the spirit (Gal. 5:22-6:3), and a recognition that vengeance belongs to God and not to us (Rom. 12:17-21).

Do we trust God and His ways to rescue us? When we stoop to the style and methods of Limbaugh or Levin, we are not courageous Christians but carnal conservatives. Surely these men are not our heroes. Occasionally when driving I will tune into one of these notable bloviators and try to listen. I am amazed at how redundant they all are and how little of substance is actually said in the span of an hour. Certainly many of these radio personalities are capable of more substance (as they may demonstrate in a monologue or in writing), so I am not questioning their intelligence; but when they are entertaining their listeners, they fall prey to doing what most entertainers do—pleasing their primary audience. However, these

entertainers whose guiding principle is to please men are not servants of Christ (Gal. 1:10), so we should not be surprised that their methods are not Christ-like, and we should not imitate them.

We must continue to resist the spiritual and moral degradation that our country is going through in the hopes that our nation will become ripe for repentance rather than judgment. We are not ignorant of Satan's devices that he is effectively using to soften our revulsion toward homosexuality as he has already done with our more tolerant attitudes toward the heterosexual sins of fornication, divorce, and remarriage. However, we also know that his devices include inciting zealots to take up carnal methods and weapons to have us bite and devour one another in the name of truth, justice, and the American way. Instead our response needs to be with grace and truth in the spirit of Jesus Christ.

In offering the peace that only Christ can bring to warring factions of conservatives and liberals, Christians may suffer attacks from all sides; but let us glorify God in these matters (1 Pet. 4:16) rather than ourselves, our traditions, our country, or our political party.

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The past issue cost more than estimated because I forgot about the Annual Bulk Mail Permit coming due. However, due an unusually large total of donations, we have more than enough to pay for this issue, which is expected to cost approximately \$540, leaving a projected balance of about \$973 toward future issues. We are deeply thankful for every donation.

Two Worthy Benevolence Needs

Two deserving cases involving benevolence needs have come to our attention. Limited space in this publication does not make it feasible to provide adequate information to brethren who may be able to help, so we would encourage you to go to our website (thinkonthesethings.com) where more information will be provided for the following financial needs:

Royce DeBerry, gospel preacher, with six children, who has a form of leukemia and is faced with weekly chemotherapy and blood draws that insurance will not cover.

Lisa Johnson, faithful Christian, who has suffered a family crisis, has now been diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis and faces treatment which is estimated to cost her \$10,000 a year out-of-pocket expense.

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