

The Error of Ultimate Reconciliation

By Jim Richards

George Santayana, the Spanish philosopher once said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it!" Solomon, the wisest man in the world, once said, *"That which has been is what will be, That which is done is what will be done, And there is nothing new under the sun"* (Eccl. 1:9). Sadly, those who don't know history are doomed to repeat the failures of the past.

Church history is one of those topics that the "hyper-spiritual" deem to have little value. Putting down the study of church history ranks right up there in the "ignorant Christian" poll with those who boldly declare, "I don't want to study theology or doctrine; I just want to read the Bible!" Jesus knew the history of His people and He knew the doctrines of the day, as did the Apostle Paul. It was their knowledge of these practical areas that made them so powerful in so many different cultural settings and doctrinal conflicts. This lack of knowledge is the doorway for error to cycle through the Church repeatedly and be welcomed by unsuspecting generations as "new revelation."

The prophet Isaiah boldly declared, *"Therefore my people have gone into captivity, Because they have no knowledge"* (Isa. 5:13). While the Spirit-filled movements have introduced incredible truth into the body of Christ, they have, as a whole, been very poor theologians. The inconsistency of doctrine is a major reason Spirit-filled believers can't get what they believe to actually work in real life. Our covenants are mixed, our doctrine is self contradictory, and we know nothing of how we got where we are! The 21st century church is a breeding ground for doctrinal error - not the kind that simply causes an argument between you and other believers; this is the type of error that could affect every part of your life!

Error, like all trends, tends to circulate every few years. When error emerges those who don't know history, specifically church history, think they have a revelation. They see it as a "scrumptious morsel," unaware of the damage it has wreaked in the past. In the race to have the next new revelation some preachers rush to their pulpits, or in the case of traveling preachers, they rush to your pulpit and create havoc in the hearts of believers.

One doctrine that emerges every few years is Ultimate Reconciliation, sometimes called Universalism. Regardless of the name it goes by, its message is the same: everyone is going to Heaven, whether they believe or not. This is an appealing message to people who will not reconcile their life and beliefs with particular aspects of truth. What seems like a message of endless love is actually a message of death, deceit, and depravity.

Years ago I traveled with a man who began the slide into Universalism. At first it seemed as if he was only preaching a mildly irresponsible grace message. People

approached me after our meetings and said, "When I hear you preach about grace I believe I can live godly and I'm inspired to godly living. When I hear him preach about grace I feel like it's just alright to sin." In time, he was openly declaring that sin had no effect and he began rejecting any portions of Scripture that promoted responsibility and godliness. Ultimately he succumbed to a battle with sin that he no longer chose to resist! The way we know when the message of grace, peace and faith righteousness has gone too far is when they inspire irresponsible living!

All deadly truth has an element of truth; however, that truth is extrapolated into something that is no longer true. Extrapolation is how Lucifer became Satan. He followed a flawed reasoning. (Ez. 28:17) Based on his brightness and splendor he began to build a logic that departed from reality. In the end, he felt he could overthrow the One who gave him his splendor. God has given us grace, love, mercy and the gift of righteousness so we can have the power to live a godly life, not to excuse us from godly living.

Extrapolation is the process of ultimate reconciliation. It starts with some basic truths. First, it capitalizes on God's unconditional love. It couples that with the fact (and it is a fact) that Jesus died for the sins of the entire world, not for the few. Add this with some humanistic logic that exalts man and his needs above God and His plan, and you have a recipe for devastating error.

Jesus died for the sins of the world, not just for those who would believe and receive, but also for those who would not. (1 John 2:2) God was proactive and preemptive in His limitless love. Because of Jesus becoming the sin of the world, all men were free from the wrath of God. No man in this life has experienced God's wrath. The apostle John said, *In this, the propitiation, we see the love of God*" (1 John 4:9-10). Many people respond to His expression of love with love and trust and many others see it as a free pass for irresponsible living.

Everything God offers us must be received, (lambano) taken hold of, by our trust (faith) in God. (Rom. 1:16) Everything of God is given freely, but our personal participation is a choice, thus the idea of free will. The Universalist denies free will and insists that everyone is saved whether they know it or not, whether they want it or not. By lifting a few Scriptures out of context and ignoring dozens more, personal responsibility is glossed over as a moot point!

You see, the Universalists, much like the Spirit-filled community, actually miss the ultimate point: Jesus came so we could know (experience, be intimate with) God. For some, God is just the One we run to when we have needs. We really have no desire to know Him or His ways; we simply want His benefits. It may be this corrupt version of Christianity that creates such a breeding ground for an impersonal faith!

Extrapolation is based on a logic that creates non-existent formulas, "this equals that." When questioned about the basis of their process of reasoning, it usually comes back to, "That's what I believe" or "That's how I see it." It doesn't matter how we see it if it's

not supported by the truth of God's Word. We are called to cast down vain imaginations and reasoning that exalt themselves against the knowledge of God. (2 Cor. 10:4-5) This process is called 'subjective reasoning'. A reasoning that is based on how it makes you feel regardless of all the other facts. Subjective reasoning places "me" at the center of the equation. I fall prey to the original temptation to be as God and choose good and evil from my own judgments.

One of the well known modern day proponents of Universalism is Carlton Pearson. I met personally with Carlton when he first made his exit from the faith. According to our discussion, his subjective reasoning seemed to peak when he held his newborn baby in his arms and said, "I would never send my child to Hell if he did something wrong." That very statement, and the doctrine that Carlton had been preaching, made it clear he already had error in his theology. But even if God would do such a thing, who are we to say to the Potter, "You can't do it that way."

The Universalists are basically taking a stand that they are more righteous, more compassionate and more merciful than God. They, too, have exalted themselves above God by exalting their own logic and condemning His! It's in this very attitude that we may see the real root of the problem. We are called to **surrender** to Jesus as Lord. We are **compelled** to renew our minds and put on the mind of Christ. It seems that too many seek Jesus as Savior but not as Teacher and Lord.

Failure to cling to Jesus as Lord of our logic leads us down destructive, unfulfilling paths. In the absence of a meaningful relationship, we search for knowledge to give what is missing in our heart. Maybe it is, in fact, the lack of an intimate relationship with God that spills over into an incredible sense of lack and insecurity that spurs the desperate search for something to bring us the peace that only comes through relationship.

It was Mike Williams who introduced, or finally convinced, Carlton Pearson in the doctrine of Universalism. Mike was a long time friend and associate. He is a man I loved deeply and grieved for as he made his departure from the faith. Mike came from a life of homosexuality and at the time he turned to Ultimate Reconciliation, he had fallen back into an immoral lifestyle. As his life degenerated, his message grew more and more compromising.

As someone close to Mike said, "You always know what Mike is going through, he always preaches his life." And that's true; Mike's doctrine changed every time his life changed. When he couldn't get grace to work in his life, he simply changed his doctrine of grace. Like many, he developed circumstance theology that justified his own life. This is a common tendency among those who lean toward permissive doctrine. They need a "revelation" that justifies their failing life!

In an interview with Allen Speegle, we discussed why grace preachers would be susceptible to the doctrine of Ultimate Reconciliation. It is my observation that there are three primary reasons for this.

1. First, most grace preachers simply embrace grace as a doctrine, not as a means to a more powerful life. This, of course, means they are not experiencing grace. Grace is God's power to live in righteousness, to live as it really should be. The doctrine is a sad replacement for the reality!

The power of grace is experienced to support the belief of faith righteousness. Faith righteousness began by Jesus obtaining righteousness by His faith; it is brought to fruition by us experiencing that righteousness by faith. As Romans 1:17 says, "*It is revealed from faith to faith.*" If Jesus' righteousness is received by faith, then righteousness has to be the object of our faith.

This brings another basic theological flaw to the forefront. The primary reason for receiving Jesus as Savior and Lord is not just to save us from the penalty of our sin but to save us from the power of sin. We are set free from the power of sin to live a righteous life. It's in righteousness that we enjoy life as it was meant to be. When we forget the destruction of sin in our lives, we forget why we came to Jesus.

2. The second reason grace preachers may succumb to this error is that our life often facilitates the need for self-justification. When preachers don't reach the lost, when they don't make their churches relevant, when they are seeking to build a ministry before building people, they need a doctrine that justifies the departure from New Testament goals and agendas. You see, it's not the erroneous doctrine that leads to the compromised ministry and life. No! It's the compromised life that needs a doctrine to justify itself!
3. The third reason is all too common. People who are not experiencing the grace of God, those who do not believe the Gospel of Peace in a way that leads to an intimate love life with God, tend to miss the point. In the absence of a life experience, they think it's the new revelation that gets people excited about their ministry. They fail to realize the excitement isn't in the message; it's in the power of the message. In their shallow insecurity they think they need to be ever finding new revelation to preach to people with itching ears. (2 Tim. 4:3) The preacher who is trying to impress will always end up in error!

The church desperately needs the message of grace, peace and faith righteousness. But we need to live and model this message through our life, our character and our commitment to the true cause of Christ. It's those who misuse and misapply these cornerstone truths that give the legalists the opportunity to decry the message.

One of the greatest ways you can tell that grace, peace and faith righteousness are no more than a message is when the life doesn't change. Ultimate Reconciliation misses the point that we have a predestined purpose to be transformed into the likeness of Jesus. (Rom. 8:29) That is our destiny.

Being delivered from wrath and being unconditionally loved doesn't equate salvation

and righteousness by faith; it does, however, facilitate the opportunity. In the absence of fear and in the presence of love we can come unafraid. When we know everything God does is for our good we have every reason to trust and follow Him. If we continue in the same sins as before we knew Jesus, they accomplish the same destruction. That destruction is not the product of God's wrath; it's the fruit of sin.

In my meeting with Carlton Pearson and in discussions with Mike Williams and many others who began to follow this erroneous path, I asked the question, "Do you not believe there is any benefit to living a godly life? Do you not see the destruction of sin? If so, then why is the focus of your message the permissiveness of sin?" Paul, Peter, James and John all echoed these sentiments in various terminologies: flee every type of sin, don't yield to the flesh, don't use your freedom as an excuse for sin, and don't suffer for unrighteousness. The message is clear: sin still kills. While the beginning of Ultimate Reconciliation is not a blanket invitation to a reckless life, in the end that is the fruit.

Churches that embrace even the slightest hint of this doctrine lose sight of biblical agendas and ultimately their purpose. The need for relevancy evaporates. The passion to win the lost becomes needless. The value for the most basic ministry needs disappear with the idea that all men are ultimately going to Heaven - so what's the urgency?

We live in a day when people need God's power working in them more than ever! The need for Spirit-empowered grace to take us to a life beyond our strength is imminent. We may be in what the Bible calls the "beginning of sorrows"; but whether we are or not, be assured we are living in difficult times, the likes of which the world has never seen. Our nation is disturbingly close to facing the horrors others nations have faced for generations. The church in America isn't ready! We are poised for a great falling away! The only cure is a Gospel that works - which will require leaders that experience it.

Fresh new revelation doesn't come because we discover what has never been seen. Revelation is when we look at a truth in a new way, a way that empowers us to live in victory. People don't need their lives complicated by a lot of new doctrines; they need to know how to get the doctrines we have to work. People need to be led into a relationship with Jesus. They need mentors and models. They don't need to hear a message of grace; they need to see a lifestyle of grace.

This righteousness of God is by faith from first to last. Jesus obtained it by faith; we take hold of it by faith; and it empowers our life by faith. Inspire people to a better life than they ever imagined - a life of knowing and experiencing God's love, grace, and righteousness.