

Self-Indulgent Religion

July 2005

Rarely do I read a newspaper article on religion that I agree with. Usually what is published is some left-wing, doctrinally relative, all-inclusive, politically correct essay. But on Monday (7/4/05) the AJC (of all papers) ran an article by Robert S. McElvaine that was unique in its candor and insightfulness. The article was written against the backdrop of the conviction of Bernard Ebbers and the acquittal of Richard Scrushy in cases of massive corporate fraud. Both are hailed by their defenders as “good Christian men.” Some excerpts:

“The unwillingness of so many self-professed Christians to say that any sort of sinful behavior is incompatible with being “a good Christian” is very revealing about the brand of Christianity that has become so popular and so politically potent in the United States in recent decades.

“It is unsurprising that people who believed that Ebbers and Scrushy could bring them huge wealth without effort also are adherents to a religion that might best be called Christianity Lite, which promises eternal salvation in return for nothing more than professing acceptance of Jesus as one’s Lord and Savior. Believe in Jesus and He will instantly save you. Believe in Bernie and he will instantly make you rich.

“The brand of Christianity embraced by Ebbers, Scrushy and those who still see them as “good Christian men” is one that basically says all you need to do is accept Jesus and then you can do whatever you want. In effect, it argues that God watches what we say, not what we do.”

The liberty we have in Christ is nearly beyond description. God has shared with us truth that sets us free from Satan’s deceit (Jn 8:32). In Christ we have been liberated from the dominion of sin (Rom 6:18). We have been given the chance to be justified on a basis other than law (Rom 6:15; Rom 3:20-22; Gal 3:10-13). The dread of death no longer dominates our subconscious thought; rather, the Christian knows that he approaches the end of life leaning on the mercy and grace of Jesus (Heb 2:15; 1 Cor 15:56-57; Rom 8:1). The shackles of ignorance, lust, fear, vanity, pride and every harmful thing have been broken.

What a travesty to turn this wonderful liberty into selfish license.

Yet this is precisely what modern “Christian” theology has done. A self-indulgent mindset has reduced Christianity to a mere formality, stripped of its moral force and life-transforming power. A life-long endeavor to become Christ-like (Eph 4:13-15) has been replaced with a momentary verbal declaration (often excited by the emotion of a near-death experience or a slick revival preacher). It is not uncommon to hear people speak of “getting saved” as early as four or five years old. And such fragrant testimonials are often overpowered by the moral stench in which the professed “believer” is currently living.

Mr. McElvaine continues:

It is a peculiarly American twist on Calvinism that divides the world in the Elect and the Damned, but democratizes the process by providing for self-election. This perversion of Christianity reduces Jesus to a “get out of jail free” card.

Here is where Mr. McElvaine and I part ways. I agree that American self-centeredness has taken Calvinism to new heights, *but this is the logical place to which the doctrines of John Calvin lead*. McElvaine wishes to defend classical Calvinism (which teaches that God unilaterally and unconditionally saves some and condemns others), but any doctrine which places the responsibility for salvation wholly upon God’s shoulders compromises moral responsibility. This isn’t merely an “American perversion”; it is the natural result when self-centered people embrace a self-serving doctrine of God’s sovereignty.

Our speakers this week are stressing the importance of spiritual growth: *“Beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”* (2 Pet 3:18; cf. Heb 5:12-14; 2 Pet 1:5-11). There are no paved, level shortcuts to heaven. God’s people will arrive at their destination with the scars of diligent effort, self-denial, acceptance of guilt, persecution, etc. But they will arrive looking more like Christ than when they began the journey.