

THE PRESENTATION OF THE GOSPEL AMONGST

HYPER-CALVINISTS: A CRITIQUE

Pastor Robert J. Sheehan BD

(Welwyn)

In our previous issue (May '82, Issue 8), Pastor Sheehan provided us with some historical background material to this subject with special reference to the writings of W.J. Styles and John Gill. We now publish his brief but helpful critique of the 'Hyper' position with regard to calling unbelievers to repentance and faith.

The writer is Pastor of Welwyn Evangelical Church, Hertfordshire.

Traditional Calvinists and Hyper-Calvinists are agreed that repentance and faith are gifts of God given to those in whom God is doing his work of Regeneration. However, there the agreement ends. The Hyper-Calvinist builds a superstructure on this truth drawing out what he believes to be its logical consequences. He argues that as repentance and faith are divine gifts for the regenerate:

(i) the unregenerate cannot be commanded to repent and believe

(ii) all Scriptural commands, exhortations and invitations to repent and believe must either be made to the regenerate or made in a context unconnected with spiritual salvation.

(iii) only those conscious of the Spirit's work within can heed the commands to repent and believe and only these should be directed to do so.

These conclusions were set out in detail in my previous article and now some response must be made.

Firstly, we ought to take great exception to the methodology of Hyper-Calvinism. It is fundamentally rationalistic. It takes certain truths from the teaching of Scripture and then builds up a system of theology on the basis of nothing more than human logic. Its method is exactly that of the Jehovah's Witness who begins with the Biblical truth that God is one and therefore logically deduces He cannot be three. Like the Jehovah's Witness, and all those ruled by a rationalistic hermeneutic, the Hyper-Calvinist does not ask

what the Scriptures teach as a whole but seeks to fit the teachings that do not comply with the truth he has grasped into a neat and logical system.

This preoccupation with logical systematisation leads the Hyper-Calvinist to ignore the possibility of antinomy or duality. Antinomy or duality is that situation that arises when two things that cannot logically be reconciled, or affirmed as true at the same time, are held in tension. Duality is a reality in physics: light is both viewed as waves and particles - an apparently contradictory duo. It is also present to a large extent in theology: God is one but three; Christ is human but divine; the kingdom of God is present but future. So with sovereignty and responsibility: repentance and faith are gifts of God, but man is responsible to repent and believe. This is precisely what Hyper-Calvinism denies but if it used its logic on other doctrines it would have to be unitarian or tritheistic, docetist or kenoticist.

The question that Hyper-Calvinists should have asked, but fails to is: Does the Scripture call on the unregenerate to repent and believe? If it does, then this truth must be held in tension with the fact that repentance and faith are gifts of God and consequences of regeneration. The Hyper-Calvinist, however, begins with his assumption from Scripture and fits the rest of the Scriptures into his logical superstructure accordingly.

Secondly, the Hyper-Calvinist attempt to make all Scriptural commands, exhortations and invitations addressed to the regenerate fails. As stated in the last article the Hyper-Calvinist makes a number of attacks on traditional Calvinism. He rejects the use of Old Testament commands and invitations as appropriate for the unregenerate because they were addressed to Israel, a covenant people. Most of the commands and invitations of the Gospels and much of Acts are dismissed in the same way. Israel is viewed as the backslidden people of God and is addressed as such. The normal unregenerate man does not stand in this relationship with God and therefore cannot be addressed as if he did.

At root the Hyper-Calvinist shows a gross misunderstanding of Israel. The Old Covenant made Israel a privileged people (Rom.3:1-2; 9:1-5) with special responsibilities (Amos 3:2). Her special privileges gave her special responsibilities but it did not mean that the people of Israel as a whole or even in the main were

regenerate. Indeed, the Scriptures suggest just the opposite! Not all Jews were true Jews (Rom.2:28-29) i.e. regenerate. Not all Israel is true Israel (Rom.9:6-7) i.e. regenerate. The implication of this is that the invitations and commands of the Old Testament which were addressed indiscriminately to the Jewish nation (e.g. Ezek.33:11) were addressed not to a regenerate people in a state of backsliding but to a privileged people who were, in spite of their privilege, unregenerate. Unless it can be proven from Scripture that every Jew from the time of Abraham to the fall of Jerusalem was regenerate then the commands to repentance and faith found in the Old Testament, Gospels and Acts were addressed to unregenerate people. If this is so the whole Hyper-Calvinist contention that only the regenerate can be so commanded collapses.

The Hyper-Calvinist attacks the traditional Calvinist because he uses commands and invitations found in the epistles in his preaching to the unregenerate. The Hyper-Calvinist argues that 2 Corinthians 5:20 is written in a letter addressed to a 'church' and 'saints' (2 Cor.1:1) and that it must, therefore, be a call to Christians to enter into the full privileges of reconciliation and not be an address to the unregenerate as these would not be called the 'church' or 'saints'.

Again the Hyper-Calvinist shows a failure to appreciate a basic principle of interpretation. In the Scriptures people are treated and regarded according to their profession of faith. It is only the profession of faith and the outward life that can be observed. It is beyond man to see the heart (1 Sam.16:7). On his profession of faith Simon Magus was baptised. His profession of faith is described in the same manner as that of others (Acts 8:12-13) and only subsequent events proved this believer's profession to be false (Acts 8:20-22).

In exactly the same way the churches of the New Testament are addressed according to their profession of faith and described in terms fitting for true believers. However, not all the members of those churches were regenerate, real saints. If they were then what do we do with the Corinthians? They are all described as 'the church' and 'sanctified' (1 Cor.1:2) but Paul must later shame them by asserting that some of them were devoid of the knowledge of God i.e. non-Christians (1 Cor.15:34). How appropriate that the non-Christian members of the church at Corinth should be exhorted to

be reconciled to God (2 Cor.5:20 along with any unbelievers at their meetings (1 Cor.14:23)!

It is evident that neither the Old nor the New Testament commands and invitations are limited to the regenerate. Christ Jesus came to call sinners to repentance (Matt.9:13) not the regenerate!

Thirdly, the Hyper-Calvinist attempt to argue that many of the references referred to by traditional Calvinists in their preaching to sinners are in fact nothing to do with salvation is erroneous. Styles may well argue (see the previous article) that the Spirit's strivings in the days of Noah, and Jonah's preaching in Ninevah were calls not to spiritual repentance resulting in spiritual life but calls for moral repentance to avoid merely temporal disasters but the Scriptures know of no such dichotomy. At the very least the Old Testament calls to repentance to avoid judgement are a prefiguring of the ultimate judgement and of the need for repentance unto salvation. Our Lord saw repentant Ninevites standing on the Day of Judgement in condemnation of the impenitent Jews (Matt.12:41). Peter saw a clear connection between the striving of the Spirit in Noah's day and Christian salvation (1 Pet.3:18-4:6). To argue that Ninevite repentance was not spiritual but merely national and that it has no eternal value is a gratuitous assumption.

Fourthly, the Hyper-Calvinist view of the reason why a person should repent and believe - because he sees the evidence of regeneration within himself and feels called of God - creates a deficient doctrine of Scripture.

Hyper-Calvinists often pride themselves on their 'careful' exegesis whereby they seek out the context of the invitations and commands and 'prove' that they are inapplicable to the unregenerate. In fact, Hyper-Calvinism is rooted in a low view of Scripture (albeit unconsciously) and a false dichotomy is established between the Word and the Spirit. The fact that the Scriptures command something is not enough. The sinner must wait until the Spirit applies the command to him and when the Spirit leads him then he believes that he has a part in the death of Christ. There is an incipient Barthianism in Hyper-Calvinism.

The prominent Hyper-Calvinist preacher, J.C.Philpot, explicitly

rejected that religion which required men to do something because the Bible told them to. He affirmed that only when the Spirit told him to do something would he do it.¹ Many charismatics would blush to say such a thing, but Philpot did not!

The sinner has to wait for God to act and speak: to act in regeneration and to give evidence of that act by giving a call to the sinner to repent and believe: a call not from the teaching of Scripture alone, but in addition to it, a personal call. It is an undeniable fact that many persons in Hyper-Calvinist congregations wait passively in their pews for decades and die leaving their relatives 'hopeful' but never sure of salvation.

Where Hyper-Calvinism does not create mere passivity it creates introspection: not the introspection of a person looking for growth in grace and conscious that if we sin we have an advocate (1 John 1:5-2:2) but the introspection of a person looking for the evidence of regeneration that will give him reason to believe in Christ for salvation. Whereas most 'isms' direct men to look at their works for their hope of salvation, Hyper-Calvinism calls for men to look at God's work in them for their grounds of believing they have salvation. Hyper-Calvinism, therefore, directs men away from looking to Christ and requires them to first look within. It causes men to ask whether they are thirsty enough, hungry enough, willing enough, to be saved and develops a doctrine of discovering whether one is made worthy enough to believe. While it boasts of free grace it prefaces the enjoyment of free grace with internal searchings. While it boasts of exalting God it in fact turns attention from the cross of Calvary to the heart of man, and in doing so it places its adherents in a great dilemma because only God knows the heart (Jer.17:9).

Fifthly, the bankruptcy of Hyper-Calvinism as a true reflection of Biblical thought is to be found in the exegesis of its advocates. Much of the exegesis of Styles is embarrassing because it is so obviously forced. Hyper-Calvinistic exegesis joins many others in declaring a truth that all theological traditions do well to take more notice of: the Scriptures are not to be forced to fit into a system. It is better to have the tension of antinomy than the 'clever' but unconvincing interpretation..

Reference

1. Letters and Memoir of J.C.Philpot. Baker Book House. p120