

THE WEAKNESS OF GOD'S SERVANTS

If someone asked us, "What is the Bible?" we probably would not begin our answer by saying, "The Bible is a realistic book." Yet in the twentieth century this might be the best place to start—to stress the realism of the Bible in contrast to the romanticism which characterizes the twentieth-century concept of religion. To most modern people, truth is to be sought through some sort of leap from which we extract our own personal religious experiences.

Many feel that the Bible should portray a romantic view of life, but the Bible is actually the most realistic book in the world. It does not glibly say, "God's in His heaven—all's right with the world!" It faces the world's dilemmas squarely. Yet, unlike modern realism which ends in despair, it has answers for the dilemmas. And, unlike modern romanticism, its answers are not optimism without a sufficient base, not hope hung in a vacuum.

So we should say at once to twentieth-century people: the Bible is a tough-fibered book.

FORCE AND FORM

The Bible's realism leads to many practical applications. For example, because it views men as sinners, the Bible teaches that there is a need for force in this fallen world. Form will not grow by itself. Allen Ginsberg was typical of some who say that form is unnecessary: remove form and life will turn out really well. But take a good look at society without form and without at least some force to maintain that form. Anarchy soon dehumanizes men.

But happily the Bible gives answers which fit the structure of a lost world. It teaches that force must be used at many different levels. Christians understand that chastisement must be used at home. If your children are part of the revolted race of men (as the Bible says they are), then in our homes we must provide structure and form as

well as freedom. The balance of form and freedom must exist in the home in a practical way: there must be chastisement as a part of love.

The biblical concept is rooted in the character of God Himself. God exists and He is holy; He hates sin and wrong and cruelty. He will judge sin; yet at the same time He is love. So the Christian's task is to show forth, and act upon, the character of God. The Christian should not be romantic toward sin and the lostness of the world; in his home, society, church, organizations and relationships, he should implement judgment when necessary—but with the simultaneous motives of righteousness and love.

Once we see the Bible's realism, we can understand why the Reformation produced a democracy of checks and balances. A Christian does not trust even himself with unlimited power. Calvin pointed out that because men are sinners, it is better to be governed by the many rather than the few or a single man. Every Christian organization and every state built on the Reformation mentality is built to allow men freedom under God, but not unlimited freedom. Unlimited freedom will not work in a lost world; some structure and form are necessary.

So when we say that the Bible is a realistic book, this is not just a theoretical proposition on a metaphysical chessboard. It relates to realities in life—realities in the home, in government, in the way we look at the world.

SIN AND THE CRUELTY OF UTOPIANISM

Sin is sin, and we must not call it less than sin. It is not an act of love to explain sin away as psychological determination or sociological conditioning, for it is real and must be dealt with. Men need a Savior. Therefore, Christians in our generation must resist relativistic and deterministic thinking. If men are going to find a real solution to the problem of who they are, they

must come to terms with the fact that they need a Savior because they are sinners in the presence of a holy God. Sin is serious business.

Equally as Christians, sin in our lives is also a serious business. We are never merely to explain it away in ourselves, in our group, or in our family.

On the other hand, knowing that all men are sinners frees us from the cruelty of utopianism. Utopianism is cruel, for it expects of men and women what they are not and will not be until Christ comes. Such utopianism, forgetting what the Bible says about human sinfulness, is hard-hearted; it is as monstrous a thing as one can imagine.

I have said that sin is a serious business, and we must never minimize that. But we are also being less than biblical if we slip into romanticism and utopianism.

Bible-believing Christians should never have the reaction designated by the term shocked. There is a type of Christian who constantly draws himself or herself up and declares, "I am shocked." If he is, he is not reacting to reality as he should, for it is as much against the teaching of Scripture to romanticize men, himself or others as to explain away sin. On the one hand, we should not view men with a cynical eye, seeing them only as meaningless products of chance; but on the other hand, we should not go to the opposite extreme of seeing them romantically. To do either is to fail to understand who men really are—creatures made in the image of God, but fallen.

The Christian understanding of man is not just theoretical. Christians should also be able to show more understanding to men than can either the cynic or romantic. We should not be surprised when a man demonstrates he is a sinner because, after all, we know that all men are sinners. When someone sits down to talk with me, I should convey to him (even if I do not express it in words) the attitude that he and I are both sinners.

And immediately, when I communicate this perception, a door swings open for dialogue. Nothing will help you as much in meeting people, no matter how far out they are or how caught they are in the modern awfulness, than for them to perceive in you the attitude "we are both sinners." This does not mean that we minimize sin, but we can still exhibit that we understand him because we stand in the same place. We can say "us" rather than just "you." To project shock as though we are better slams the door shut. Each of us does not need to look beyond himself to know that men and women are sinners.

Utopianism is terribly cruel because it expects the impossible from people. These expectations are not based on reality. They stand in opposition to the genuine human possibilities afforded by the realism of the Scripture.

Utopianism can cause harm. In the home, in the man-woman relationship, nothing is more cruel than for the wife or husband to build up a false image in his or her mind and then demand that the husband or wife measure up to this false romanticism. Nothing smashes homes more than this. Such behavior is totally contrary to the Bible's doctrine of sin. Even after redemption, we are not perfect in this present life. It is not that we avoid saying sin is sin, but we must have compassion for each other, too.

Utopianism is also harmful in the parent-child relationship. When a parent demands more from his child than the child is capable of giving, the parent destroys him as well as alienates him. But the child can also expect too much of his parents. It cuts both ways. All over the world, perhaps especially in the Western world, children are expecting too much perfection from adults. And because the parent does not measure up to the child's concept of perfection, the child smashes him.

Utopianism is also destructive with a pastor and people. How many pastors have been

smashed because their people have expected them to live up to an impossible ideal? And how many congregations have been injured by pastors who forgot that the people in their churches could not be expected to be perfect?

If we demand, in any of our relationships, either perfection or nothing, we will get the nothing. Only when we have learned this will we be Bible-believing Christians, and only then will we understand something of life. Only then can we be more understanding toward men and show real compassion. Consequently, I would repeat, if in any of our relationships of life we demand perfection or nothing, we will have nothing.

A UTOPIAN SELF-CONCEPT

Utopianism enters another area to injure Christians, especially serious Christians: a Christian can build up a romantic, idealistic concept of himself and begin expecting absolute perfection from himself. This, too, is a destructive monster.

I am not negating or minimizing sin. But we must understand that the expectation of personal perfection is a romanticism not rooted in Scripture. If I demand perfection from myself, then I will destroy myself. Many Christians vacillate between being permissive in regard to sin toward themselves on the one hand, and demanding perfection from themselves on the other. They end up battered and crushed because they do not live up to their own image of perfection.

The worst part is that often this image does not have anything to do with biblical standards, with the true law and character of God. A person builds up an image of what a Christian is like as his group or he himself projects it, and then constantly turns inward for subjective analysis and finds he does not measure up to this image. Perhaps the cruelty of utopianism is most manifest at just this point, when an individual

applies his own utopianism to himself. He says, "A Christian is like this . . .," "A Christian is like that . . .," and then proceeds to an inward destruction. A Christian must understand that sin is sin, and yet know that he should not establish for himself a model of "perfection or nothing."

In other words, a Christian can defeat himself in two ways: one is to forget the holiness of God and the fact that sin is sin. The Bible calls us to an ever deeper commitment in giving ourselves to Christ for Him to produce His fruit through us. The other is to allow himself to be worn out by Christians who turn Christianity into a romanticism. The realism of the Bible is that God does not excuse sin, but neither is He finished with us when He finds sin in us. And for this we should be thankful.

In 1 John we read some wonderful words: "My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:1, 2). Though some people use 1 John to beat themselves into a bloody mass through overly inward inspection, they would not do this if they really understood what John is saying, especially in his preface to his book (1 John 1:1–2:2). For there John makes plain that God does not abandon us when we sin, though sinning is serious and terrible. And that is so whether it was John himself or we Christians living today.

The Christian is called not to sin, and we should say repeatedly to one another, Do not sin. But if a Christian does sin, he still has an Advocate with the Father. Isn't that beautiful? Could you live if it were not true? Not if you really understand sin.

This should make us worship and adore God. Though our call is not to sin, God is not done with us when we do sin. Happily for the Apostle John

and for Paul, and for us, God is not done with a Christian when a Christian sins, or God would be finished with all of us.

THE WEAKNESS OF GOD'S SERVANTS

Among religious writings, the Bible is unique in its attitude to its great men. Even many Christian biographies puff up the men they describe. But the Bible exhibits the whole man, so much so that it is almost embarrassing at times. If we would teach our children to read the Bible truly, it would be a good vaccination against cynical realism from the non-Christian side, because the Bible portrays its characters as honestly as any debunker or modern cynic ever could.

Of course, usually we think about the strong points of the biblical men. And that is all right. Normally, we should look at the victory of biblical characters, the wonder of their closeness to God, and the exciting ways God used them according to the faith and faithfulness they displayed. But let us not be embarrassed by the other side—the Bible's candor (even about its greatest leaders), its portrayal of their weaknesses quite without embarrassment and without false show.

Paul wrote to the Romans, "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23)—a simple statement, though stronger in the Greek than it seems in translation. The Greek actually says, "all sinned [past] and are coming short [present] of the glory of God." Paul was not saying merely that all men sinned before justification, but that all Christians continue to come short of God's glory. This is the biblical picture even of its own heroes.

BIBLICAL EXAMPLES

If we look through the Scripture even quickly, the weaknesses of God's servants are apparent.

Consider Noah. We should be glad for Noah; he is certainly one of the great men of faith. He was willing to stand alone against his entire

culture. No matter where we go in our world, we will not be confronted with conditions so totally adverse. Noah was literally one man against the world.

But this does not keep the Bible from picturing him in his totality. It does not conceal that he once lay drunk and naked in his tent. Some people try to find excuses for Noah. Don't bother, because the Bible does not bother. Just say, Noah was a sinner like you and me—this is the biblical picture.

The Bible is just as ruthless in speaking about the lies of Abraham, the great father of the faith. At least twice Abraham said that his wife Sarah was his sister. Some critics have foolishly maintained that the instances of deception are really repetitions of one story, but they do not understand what God is communicating. God is stressing that Abraham did not lie only once, but a number of times.

Sarah also told lies. She even tried to lie to God. We may say that she was foolish to try to hide from God the fact that she laughed behind the tent door, but I would say gently to every one of us, including myself, don't we try to lie to God, too?

Isaac imitated his father's lie. Abraham at least told a half-truth when he said Sarah was his sister, for she was the sister by one parent but not the other. Isaac did not have any truth; he just lied.

Jacob cheated his brother. He was a man of the shortcut, trying to play all the angles.

Moses lost his temper. The anger which caused him to break the tablets of the law when he saw the golden calf was legitimate (for God shared it), but Moses sinned, on another occasion, by being angry and performing an egotistical act at a most inopportune moment, breaking a picture that God had meant to be given.

Aaron, the priest of God, made an idol, and then to explain its appearance offered one of the

silliest explanations one will find anywhere in literature. "I cast in the gold," he said, "and out came this calf." What he had undoubtedly done was to take an engraving tool and deliberately make a mold, or have it made, for the calf. The man who made the idol, the man who made such a foolish excuse, was Aaron, the priest of God.

Miriam became a leper for a time because she complained against God's appointed leadership.

Joshua did not drive the Canaanites out of the promised land as thoroughly as he should have, and hence opened the way for the awful religious compromise that finally destroyed Israel.

Gideon did many wonderful things, but then he made an ephod which became a snare to all the people.

Samson—we hardly need to mention his licentiousness.

David was a "man after God's own heart," and yet an adulterer. He told the most vicious lie one could imagine and planned indirect murder, which in God's sight was real murder.

Solomon, despite all God had given him, at the end of his life became caught in idolatry for the sake of the women he had taken to himself.

Elijah, as great as he was, became trapped in deep despondency after his victory on Mount Carmel. Though we cannot blame him (and here our biblical realism helps us), we must nevertheless call his mood what it was, despondency.

In the New Testament, Peter was a man who had both great strengths and great weaknesses. When he came to Antioch and refused to eat with the Gentile Christians, Paul had to stand against him. Peter, on this side of the resurrection and Pentecost, was, in this specific instance, a man of compromise.

BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES

This quick look at the weaknesses of some of God's servants makes us aware of a number of biblical principles.

First, all men, even the best of men, need to be saved. This is not just an evangelical cliché. From within the perspective of biblical realism, we understand that even if a man is a nice man and shows many evidences of being made in the image of God (and we should be thankful for that), he nevertheless is a sinner who needs to be saved.

The Apostle Paul understood Abraham and David to be excellent illustrations:

What shall we say, then, that Abraham, our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found? For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory, but not before God. For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered (Romans 4:1-7).

Both David and Abraham understood that it was not just others, the "they" who needed to be saved, but themselves as well.

Second, God reproves sin in all men, even the leaders He appoints. People tend not to do this. It is a fact of life that when a man has tremendous power, often nobody reproves him.

But the scriptural perspective is different. There is a real equality among men in the sight of God. Even if a person is a leader of the Lord's people, God will reprove him when he sins.

When Sarah said, "I did not laugh," God said sharply, "Sarah, you did laugh." Because he was angry at the inopportune moment, Moses did not enter the promised land. Aaron watched the pulverized golden calf being scattered on the water and probably had to drink it along with the rest of the people. Miriam became a leper for a time and had to remain outside the camp.

God did not overlook David's sin either. Though the world would have said, "Don't rock the boat," Nathan the prophet, under God's direction, really rocked the boat when he confronted David: "Thou art the man." And Paul, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, told Peter, "You are wrong" (Gal. 2:11-21). In Psalm 32, a psalm of repentance, we see God reproving David. After David pours out his heart in love to God, God responds, "I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go; I will guide thee with mine eye. Be ye not like the horse, or like the mule, that have no understanding, whose mouth must be held in with bit and bridle, lest they come near unto thee" (Ps. 32:8, 9). In other words, "David, you're a great leader, and I'll be with you, but don't be like a mule."

The third biblical principle is that the leadership of biblical men was not in every case ended because they sinned. God knew from the beginning who David was. When David was keeping sheep, God had no illusions that here was a perfect man to do God's work. David's sin did not take God by surprise. God is a sovereign God who is never taken by surprise. He knows who men are when He chooses them for leadership. There are no perfect men to do God's work. God is not romantic concerning men.

After these men of faith repented, their leadership continued. John wrote to all Christians (including, surely, those in positions of leadership), "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). If we

acknowledge we are sinners and do not pretend we are not, and if we confess our sins, then our sins are forgiven. And just as you and I should go on together when there has been confession, so God goes on with His people, including His leaders, after their repentance.

Psalm 32 contains an expression of this, and Paul quotes it in Romans 4 when he shows that David understood salvation: "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the LORD imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile" (Ps. 32:1, 2). David follows this statement with another that forms a unity with it: "When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me; my moisture is turned into the drought of summer" (Ps. 32:3, 4). David's silence was a specific kind of silence, a silence of trying to sweep his sins under the table, and during it God's chastening hand was upon him. But when he repented, the hand was lifted:

I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hidden. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD: and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin. For this shall every one that is godly pray unto thee in a time when thou mayest be found; surely, in the floods of great waters, they shall not come nigh unto thee (Psalm 32:5, 6).

This is not romanticism; it is cast in terms of sin, chastisement, confession, and restoration. It emphasizes what we are pointing out: God dealt with the sins of these leaders; but after they had confessed, He allowed their leadership to continue.

ATTITUDES FOR LEADERS

The principles which emerge from the Bible's realistic view of its leaders should affect our attitude toward both those who have been called

to lead others and those who have been called to be under another's leadership.

No matter what kind of leadership a Christian is called to—whether a leadership which makes his name great in the Christian world, or the leadership of his own wife and children, or the leadership of a Sunday school class—his attitude toward that leadership is the most important thing, not the size of his calling.

Some Christians hesitate to take any leadership (whether in affairs large or small) because they are afraid that in the future they will sin. Now if a man intends to sin, that is different. But if he only harbors a fear that someday he will sin, he should remember that God never has a romantic view of anyone He calls to leadership. God knows all men well. And while not minimizing sin or its results, especially when it is committed by a leader of God's church, we must stress this great comfort: God never looks at any Christian through rose-colored glasses. God calls a person as he is and on the basis of what he can be as he lets Christ produce fruit through him.

What, then, should be a Christian's mentality when he is at some leadership level, whether "high" or "low" and finds sin in his life? The starting place is to be humble and listen. Peter apparently listened to Paul. This does not mean that a person should accept every criticism as justified, but he ought to take time to think and pray over every criticism quietly before the Lord.

Second, a Christian leader must recognize that when he does sin, he will be chastened. Christian leadership does not relieve the call to Christian living. God is neither a respecter of persons nor a taker of bribes. All his children are equal. Even if a person is working eighteen hours a day for God, God will chasten him when he sins. So when this happens, a leader should not become angry with God. God takes the sin of Christian leaders seriously.

Third, being a Christian leader does not shut him off from the solution to sin described in 1 John and elsewhere in Scripture. Like anybody else, a Christian leader can repent. But there is an added note of urgency. To the extent that we are in a place of leadership (elder, pastor, teacher or whatever), we must especially hurry to repent because if we do not, not only will we be hurt, but so will the Lord's work. If we are in the place of leadership, then hurry—hurry and repent when we sin.

In the lives we have examined above, some did not repent quickly, and the Lord's work was spoiled. Saul did not repent at all, and Saul was set aside; his leadership was at an end.

ATTITUDES FOR THOSE WHO ARE LED

The Bible's realism has implications for followers as well as leaders, and these implications hold true whether we are following men now dead but survived by their books or men now alive. The first rule, which brings us back to where we started, is this: do not be romantic about your Christian leaders. Do not idolize them. If you do, you will eventually find weaknesses in them, and you will turn on them when you find less than perfection.

Let's say we are studying a biography of Hudson Taylor or William Carey, and someone writes of some weakness in him. If we then kick the biography out the window, we are being romantic. We are not understanding the doctrine of sin. We should not be caught between idolizing and despising. If we revere a person too much and then find weaknesses, our first tendency will be to deny any value at all in the man. But this is not right. The Bible is not romantic, and we are not to be romantic either. We are not to minimize sin, but we can expect perfection from no one but God. If from some Christian who has helped us spiritually we demand all or nothing, we will get the nothing.

We can do some things for living Christian leaders that we cannot do for dead ones. For one thing, when a Christian leader confesses sin, he can be restored in love. Sin is sin, and the person who sins must be judged. But a repentant leader must be loved.

A good example of judgment followed by forgiveness occurred in the church at Corinth. In his first letter to the Corinthian Christians, Paul had to write:

It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath done this deed, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such a one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus (1 Corinthians 5:1-5).

A sin was being flagrantly committed, and whether or not it was by a leader, it had to be judged. But we have a caricature of the biblical teaching if we forget the sequel in Paul's second letter to Corinth, written after the judgment had come and the situation had been properly resolved: "Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many. So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. Wherefore, I beseech you that ye would confirm love toward him" (2 Cor. 2:6-8). Love is to be demonstrated toward this person, thus completing the biblical balance. The text says, "confirm love toward

him," which means much more than "confirm your love toward him." Sin must be judged; but as soon as the judgment is received, we become sinners if we do not confirm love to the one who has been in sin.

Finally, we must pray for our leaders. In our romanticism, we tend to elevate leaders so high that they might as well be pieces of wood. They are no longer people, but symbols. We cannot stand to think of them as sinners. And this is unfair.

Being a leader does not change a man's nature. We must understand our leaders to be men and pray for them as Paul asked the Thessalonians to pray for him: "Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified" (2 Thess. 3:1). We have an obligation to pray for those who have helped us.

As we reflect the Bible's realism, we will not turn people into pieces of wood and then walk away from them. Rather, we must remember that all Christians are men or women, sinners having many victories, yet sinners until Jesus comes again. There is no man or woman who does not need prayer. And if a servant of God falls, then the first question I should ask is, Have I shared his burden? Specifically, have I treated him as a piece of wood or a religious symbol, or have I prayed for him as a person?

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