

## Who Speaks for the Church?

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By Eric Landry

Since the Reformation, the Christian world has splintered exponentially. The 2001 edition of the World Christian Encyclopedia records 33,830 distinct Christian denominations across the world. One of the largest categories of Christians – in fact, second only to Roman Catholicism – is “independent.” The 386 million self-described Independent Christians outnumber Protestants by more than 40 million adherents.

The rise of such independency, which embraces a “post-denominational” model of ministry, reflects a growing appreciation for the Anabaptist wing of the Reformation, commonly called the Radical Reformation to distinguish it from both the Lutheran and Calvinist Magisterial Reformation and the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation. Anabaptists reject both Catholic and Reformation institutional hierarchies, attempt to recover the so-called pure worship of the early church, and grant to individuals the kind of spiritual authority usually reserved for the institutional church. In America, this trend is most noticeable in the strength of parachurch organizations that often operate beyond denominational bounds under only the oversight of self-appointed boards.

The assessment of independency generally and of parachurch ministries in particular hinges upon important questions of ecclesiastical authority and responsibility. There may be good reasons to favor the work of a particular parachurch organization or to engage in ministry that the organized church is either unable or unwilling to pursue. Yet the danger of unchecked authority – especially if it resides in a charismatic leader – and the lack of churchly oversight often lead to abuses of power, false theology, and a general disdain for the visible church.

Some churches have been able to construct relationships with independent parachurch organizations as a way to provide accountability to the organization’s staff while they are working with a particular church. But those situations are rare. It is far more common for parachurch organizations to operate outside the visible church. What, then, is the relationship between the visible institutional church – as it is expressed in the actions of the church and her officers – and these independent parachurch organizations that are part of the invisible church although they have no organizational ties to the visible church?

These questions may seem quite abstract but they take on a more concrete aspect when a parachurch organization is accused of financial malfeasance, doctrinal error, or other sin. One example is the controversy surrounding the Institute for Basic Life Principles (IBLP) founded and led by popular evangelical teacher Bill Gothard. Gothard and the IBLP have been the subject of intense scrutiny for the past five years by Midwest Christian Outreach (MCO), an apologetics and counter cult organization. Don Veinot, the president of MCO, and Ron Henzel, its director of research, have published *A Matter of Basic Principles* (Twenty-first Century Press, 2002), which details their concerns about Gothard theology, organizational leadership, and ethics. (In a phone call subsequent to the meeting, Bill Gothard stated that a book refuting MCO’s claims was currently being edited for publication.)

The eleven points of concern constituted the basic agenda for the meeting. They are:

1. Is there a biblical basis for Gothard’s teachings on “umbrellas” of authority?
2. Is there a scriptural foundation for Gothard’s teaching on “the iniquities of the father”?
3. Is there a biblical basis for Gothard’s teaching on the order of the worship service?

4. Is the purpose of the Gospel account of the centurion (see Matt. 8:5-13; Luke 7:1-10) given to teach Gothard's view on authority or to teach who Jesus is and the importance of faith in him?
5. Do Cabbage Patch dolls prevent the birth of children?
6. Does Gothard's teaching on authority imply that Jesus is a sinner?
7. Does the phrase "one interpretation, many applications" allow us to have Scriptural applications that are not based on or that are even contrary to the one true interpretation of a given passage of Scripture?
8. Is it proper to impose Levitical ceremonial restrictions on sexual intercourse within Christian marriage?
9. Is it proper to impose circumcision as a biblical mandate for Christians today?
10. If a Christian leader changes a significant teaching because it was shown to be unbiblical, should he not make a public retraction of that teaching to his followers?
11. Is it biblically proper to say that grace is earned?

The meeting began with each of the Gothard associates reading prepared position statements in response to MCO's eleven points. The representatives of MCO were then given approximately one hour to make a statement and response to the IBLP statements. These initial presentations were followed by counter-responses from each organization.

The participants quickly realized that hermeneutics – that is, how one interprets Scripture – was foundational to their disagreement. MCO complained that Gothard's stated practice is to apply one passage of Scripture to many different circumstances ("many applications, one interpretation"); and some of these applications, MCO believes, do not take into account the original purpose or context of the passage.

This concern was especially related to the ninth question posed to IBLP, "Is it proper to impose circumcision as a biblical mandate for Christians today?" Gothard's position is that physical circumcision has health benefits both for New Testament believers and for men today. He supports this position by appealing to Scriptures such as Col. 2:11 and Rom. 3:1-2. In a published Basic Care Bulletin entitled, "How to Make a Wise Decision on Circumcision," IBLP states that physical circumcision is "strongly commanded and reinforced in Scripture" and that by circumcising their sons on the eighth day, contemporary parents are fulfilling their calling "to follow in the footsteps of Christ." But the passages Gothard uses to defend this position actually assert, in their proper contexts (see Rom. 2:25-3:31 and Col. 2:6-23), that circumcision has no value apart from the saving work of Christ. God did not command Abraham to circumcise his male children and servants for health reasons. And Paul, in Colossians 2:11 states that the only circumcision that is of any benefit to the believers is a "circumcision made without hands."

Gothard denies that circumcision is required of believers for salvation; but he does say that the "Old Testament law – as interpreted by Jesus' command to love God and neighbor – compels us to practice circumcision." By trying to proof text his position from Scripture Gothard actually raises concerns about his own orthodoxy. By employing his own hermeneutic of "principlial application," Gothard confuses law and gospel, calling into question his understanding of the relationship of Christ and the church to the Levitical laws. Concerns about Gothard's understanding of grace are aggravated when reading his "Definition of Grace" published in 2000, by IBLP. There he states that Old Testament saints like Noah, Moses, and Gideon "found grace" from God because they "possessed qualities that merited God's favor." Gothard also says that "unmerited favor" is a faulty definition of grace because (among other reasons) it is too general; it is more applicable to mercy than to grace; it is not a true definition in all cases (here he cites Gen 6:29 and Numbers 12:3, explaining that both Noah and Moses received favor from the Lord based on their own righteousness), and so on. Gothard has revised that paper at least two times in response to questions posed to him by Veinot and MCO. The most recent revision now uses the word

“unmerited” to describe grace and no longer refers to various Old Testament saints as earning grace based on their own righteousness. But in this latest revision (which represents, Gothard says, what he has taught for the past thirty-nine years) as well as in a companion paper entitled, “The Dynamic of Grace,” he continues to confuse the issue by calling grace a works-enabling substance, namely a “power that God gives to do his will.”

This same confusion is also at the heart of another accusation against Bill Gothard – that he is legalistic. For example, the eighth point of concern asks, “Is it proper to impose Levitical ceremonial restrictions on sexual intercourse within Christian marriages?” Gothard answered with a vigorous “No.” But disagreement surfaced when copies of a *Basic Care Bulletin*, published in 1991 by Gothard’s Medical Training Institute of America, were circulated at the August 2002 meeting. In that pamphlet, Gothard’s organization argues that Christians violate Hebrews 13:4 – “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous” – when they do not practice periodic abstinence in marriage as outlined in Leviticus 15:19, 25; and 12:2-5. The pamphlet goes on to state that such violations can lead to “physical, mental, emotional and spiritual difficulties experienced by both men and women.” A promise, in the guise of a warning, is given at the end of the pamphlet, that “those who keep his Word” – that is, those who do not violate this Levitical commandment – will not suffer the diseases with which the Lord plagued the Egyptians (see Ex. 15:26). The Christian’s failure to keep the Levitical commands will result in punishment akin to the diseases with which the Lord punished Egypt, according to Gothard.

In spite of both parties’ best intentions, the August 2002 meeting ended without any resolution. MCO was hoping for a retraction from Gothard; but they didn’t get one. On the other hand, Gothard was hoping to quiet his critics’ concerns about what he asserts are fairly minor details of his teaching; but he failed to convince them that he was interpreting Scripture in an orthodox manner. The more important questions that this meeting raised were, “Who speaks for the church? Who holds leaders of parachurch organizations accountable for their teachings?” The entire conversation was, in some respects, an exercise in futility. Except for appealing to the other party to do the right thing, neither side could claim either implicit or explicit authority over the other. Don Veinot could appeal to Bill Gothard as a brother, but because neither of their organizations is part of the visible institutional church, no form of church discipline could be undertaken or enforced. Neither man, in spite of each man’s love for the Body of Christ, could claim to be operating as part of that Body. And that left both men in essentially the same position: ministering on behalf of the church while yet beyond any oversight by or accountability to the visible church.

This is not to say that there was no merit in the discussion. Any time questions of legalism and the meaning of grace, among other items, are raised Christians should hasten to clarify their views in accordance with Scripture. Bill Gothard, in spite of his obvious passion for Christians to think and act rightly, has confused serious theological issues. His teachings are characterized by an interpretation of Scripture that no other Christian organization shares. His changing or modifying teachings that he still refuses explicitly to recant does not mollify his critics. Some of Don Veinot’s criticisms concentrate on relatively minor matters, but there are significant points of confusion and error in Gothard’s teaching.

Don Veinot shares with Bill Gothard a commitment to the same model of independent parachurch ministry. This leaves him vulnerable to some of the same kinds of errors that he believes Gothard has embraced. MCO, like IBLP, operates outside the visible institutional church; and so Veinot runs under the same temptation to amass unchecked power in his own organization and illegitimately to assume that he is able to exercise some sort of legitimate authority in the wider church.

In some respects, this problem is shared by all parachurch organizations, including the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, which publishes *Modern Reformation* magazine. For although the staff, council,

board, and supporters of the Alliance are members in the visible institutional church, the Alliance itself, as an independent organization, answers only to its own council and board. Should we, then, as an independent organization be allowed to assume the task of calling for repentance and confession of false doctrine from others or is that exclusively the task of the visible institutional church? We have tried to mitigate this tension by operating as a Christian organization that produces resources for pastors and churches to do the work of the ministry rather than as a parachurch ministry that itself does the work of the church. But the dangers are still there for the Alliance, just as they are for Midwest Christian Outreach or the Institute for Basic Life Principles.

The ongoing dialogue between Don Veinot and Bill Gothard is indicative of the continuing problems of evangelical parachurch ministries. There are reasons for favoring a parachurch approach to ministry. When we wish to circumvent a moribund church bureaucracy, or take advantage of skills and people not associated with our own denomination, or provide a service that the institutional church is unable or unwilling to provide, a parachurch organization will often succeed where the church falters. But if the church's work is supplanted by parachurch organizations, then the church's authority can no longer be relied upon. Then, when faced with persecution, accusation, or condemnation, parachurch organizations often have no ecclesiastical recourse. There are no courts of appeal for those doing the work of the church beyond the church's authority and responsibility. The trend toward such ministry models is primarily born out of American individualism and pragmatism and has little in common with the theology of the church as confessed by both Luther and Calvin. For purity in doctrine and practice to take root in the broader church, Evangelicalism needs to embrace a healthy Reformational doctrine of the church that grants only to the institutional church that Christ established the power and authority that too many evangelicals want to take to themselves.

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## **A Response to Eric Landry's "Who Speaks for the Church?"**

By Ron Henzel and Don Veinot

Eric Landry put his finger on a larger issue that should concern us all when he wrote, "There are no courts of appeal for those doing the work of the church beyond the church's authority and responsibility." But he has diplomatically understated the depth of the problem in this particular case.

After nearly six years of continuous and extensive experience with Bill Gothard, we would put it a little more bluntly: in a day when someone like Gothard can form his own parachurch organization and eventually attain the role of interdenominational pope in the lives of so many believers, it *seems* that nothing can be done to hold him and others like him biblically accountable. It's not merely the fact that Gothard has droves of loyal followers that makes this issue so critical. It's that so many of his followers truly believe that he has a special pipeline to the Holy Spirit, and are willing to unbiblically destroy local churches and personal relationships to uphold his idiosyncratic and sometimes heretical views, as we have seen time and time again.

Although we don't claim to have such a pipeline, and we don't even walk in theological lockstep the way Gothard's true believers do, in the pursuit of our research we at Midwest Christian Outreach, Inc. tried to practice the model of accountability that we believe Gothard and others should follow in pursuit of the truth. After all: what good is it for us to preach accountability if we ourselves don't practice it? And yet

accountability can be so elusive. We've learned from personal experience that just because people claim to be accountable doesn't necessarily mean they understand the practical difference between that concept and, say, steamrolling over everyone in sight to get their own way.

So we had 35 Christians from various walks of life – seminary professors, pastors, laypeople, and so on – read our book on Gothard as we wrote it, inviting their reproofs and corrections. When they found something we wrote in one of the pre-publication drafts to be inappropriate for one reason or another, they did not hesitate to tell us. While we are ultimately responsible for the final product, we relied on them to help us avoid writing the kind of book that our fallen human natures might have been tempted to write at times.

We'd like to think we were allowing these people to hold us accountable. But the trouble comes when we an others want you to think we were being accountable more than we actually want it to be true, which happens all too frequently in what is often too loosely referred to as “the Lord's work.” With the right combination of savvy and chutzpah anyone can feign accountability.

The problem of achieving true *verifiable* accountability is not limited to the parachurch. It rears its ugly head in local churches, denominational structures, and evangelical institutions of higher education. The trappings of administrative checks and balances are so often no more than that. In the hands of a determined and resourceful leader, boards of directors and trustees can be played like ukuleles, reduced to rubber stamps for the leader's agenda. Boards of advisors are often merely so much window dressing. In some corners of the kingdom the rosters of board members are so incestuously interconnected that lack of accountability is a foregone conclusion. It's simply part of a bigger game – one of creating the illusion of propriety.

Bill Gothard is a proven master of this. At the height of his institute's sex scandal in the early 1980's he manipulated what was supposed to be a forced resignation into a “leave of absence,” and was back in control of the organization and people he'd been abusing within a month. In his absence another hireling had purged the institute of all dissent and accountability, paving the way for his comeback. Later Jimmy Swaggart, whether consciously or unconsciously, took a page out of Gothard's book when he decided that a one-year suspension from ministry by his denomination was too long, and that he alone should determine the length of his discipline. A quintessential expression of this form of rebellion came when the Boston Church of Christ responded to the results of a denomination investigation of it – an investigation that had agreed to cooperate with – by pulling out and forming its own denomination (the International Churches of Christ).

On more than one occasion Bill Gothard personally and directly pledged to us that he would cooperate with our research into his teachings, and make the necessary revisions if we found them to be unbiblical. Since he failed to follow through on this promise, and instead resorted to publicly attacking us, this now seems to be an obvious attempt on his part to manipulate us. All of his behavior toward us has only confirmed the assessment we received from many individuals who have dealt with him over the past 30 or more years: Bill Gothard does not submit to biblical authority. Even if his home church had not totally abdicated its responsibility to discipline him, we have no reason to believe he would have abided by their action had they attempted to do so.

Thus we find that Gothard falls into a familiar category of ministers for whom, as Landry wrote, “There are no courts of appeal” because he considers himself “beyond the church's authority.” He holds “pastor's conferences” in which he boldly instructs them in how to do their jobs, and they pay good money to be so instructed. So why should he listen to them when they think he needs correcting?

As for the road to deliverance from this quagmire, we find ourselves in basic agreement with Landry when he writes, “For purity in doctrine and practice to take root in the broader church, Evangelicalism needs to embrace a healthy Reformational doctrine of the church that grants only to the institutional church that Christ established the power and authority that too many evangelicals want to take to themselves.” And yet here we are, as Landry notes, saddled with an “American individualism and pragmatism [that] has little in common with the theology of the church as confessed by both Luther and Calvin,” and which people like Gothard use as a license to avoid genuine accountability. But must we wait for a full restoration of Reformation practice before we can hope to see false teachers in our midst disciplined? We don’t think so.

Christ’s church has dealt with this basic problem many times before, however, and we have no reason to believe that it has now assumed a form that is beyond our means of coping. Millennia of wisdom – primarily biblical, but also that derived from church history – lies close at hand and it is our sincere hope that no one believes that there is something about our unique historical context that places the solution out of reach.

We do admit that the challenges are great. Landry is basically correct when he states that, “Since the Reformation, the Christian world has splintered exponentially,” and then goes on to note that over 33,830 distinct denominations now exist. But while he may not have intended it, this statement could give the impression that the Reformation is somehow responsible for this splintering – a charge commonly leveled by Roman Catholics, yet, we believe, without historical basis. (It’s true that the freedoms secured by the Reformation made such splintering possible, but we would do well to keep in mind the alternative to these freedoms that was enforced by the medieval church.)

Instead, the existence of most of these denominations and cults is more easily traceable to the Enlightenment rather than the Reformation. Unitarianism, for example, along with its various spawn (the Watchtower Society and Remnant Fellowship, to name two), is a rationalist byproduct of the Enlightenment that has exploited the hard-won freedoms of the Reformers. Other denominations formed through separation from pre-existing ones as a reaction against the infiltration of Enlightenment thinking in those older institutions (e.g. Conservative Baptists). And the genesis of many cults can be seen either as a flight from oppressive Enlightenment rationalism into romanticism (e.g. Mormonism) or mysticism (e.g. Christian Science). Thus it was actually a general departure from the core of Reformation truth as commonly-held by most Protestants that provided the fertile seedbed for all these groups, including the Institute in Basic Life Principles.

All this has a direct connection to the secret of Bill Gothard’s “success.” As one who was raised in its lap Gothard learned well how to exploit the weaknesses of a conservative evangelicalism that has escaped neither (a) the influence of the Enlightenment nor (b) the postmodern reaction to it. If trusting in reason over revelation is the epitome of philosophical rationalism, then Bill Gothard is a consummate rationalist. His “evangelical Talmud” is a monument to the crude, homespun, (and generally specious) syllogism, containing hardly any serious exegesis of Scripture, and only an occasional nod in the direction of sound hermeneutics. While not sophisticated enough to grasp rationalism’s substance, Gothard has proven quite adept at seducing Christians with its form, gradually drawing disciples after him with countless charts, checklists, and diagrams.

Meanwhile, he’s also positioned himself to take full advantage of what has now blossomed into the postmodern reaction against rationalism, or any truth claims whatsoever for that matter. The seeds of this mentality were planted by pioneer ecumenicists, typified by such early 20<sup>th</sup> century slogans as “Doctrine divides, service unites!” While their words may have denied it, many leading evangelicals in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century kept perfect time with this increasingly shrill subcultural theme song, repeatedly

dancing completely around false doctrine in their ranks, often not even noticing it. Gothard became so good at this dance that eventually he was calling the tune.

So if Bill Gothard is keeping kids away from sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll, why quibble over a few core doctrines of the Christian faith? Thus in a yet further departure from the truths which the Reformers struggled and died for, we now have Gothard clones, Gothardite families, and Gothard churches who infant sons must be circumcised on the eighth day, whose grace must be merited, and among whom dissent from Gothard's teachings is considered a symptom of spiritual rebellion.

This accounts for the appalling lack of an evangelical response to Bill Gothard. There was no shortage of Christian magazine articles on the phenomenal growth of Gothard's seminars in the early 1970's, but it was accompanied by a breathtaking lack of discernment. Except for occasional issues raised in *Eternity* magazine, coverage of Gothard consisted largely of a collection of shallow puff-pieces. Drs. Earl Radmacher and Ronald B. Allen stood as lonely watchmen, crying out in the night of evangelicalism's heedlessness, watching in horror as Gothard's teachings bore the tragic fruit of scandal in the 1980's, much as they had predicted. It is a testimony to Gothard's public relations prowess that few outside IBLP remember those days, and a testimony to his "management style" that even fewer inside IBLP do.

We believe that Radmacher and Allen were role models for the kind of corporate response that conservative evangelicalism should have given to Gothard from the beginning. While there may not exist a formal ecclesiastical court of appeal for dealing with heresies in parachurch organizations, there is still a very effective though neglected means at the church's disposal. It's called the pulpit. And its younger cousins, the adult Sunday School class and the small group Bible study, can at times be equally effective. If the Bill Gothards of the world find ways to avoid biblical church discipline at the local level, there's no reason why he should escape it at the hands of the church at large. And there's no excuse for shepherds who fail to warn their sheep of wolves that lurk in their own backyards, as Gothard lurks in all 50 states and several foreign countries.

We don't believe that the fact that evangelicalism failed to adequately notice and address Gothard's false teachings was the inevitable consequence of a splintered church. For more than a generation now evangelicals have proven remarkably capable of mounting all kinds of evangelistic and social efforts across denominational boundaries. There's no valid reason why there couldn't have been a concerted transdenominational endeavor to boycott Gothard's seminars until he straightened out his doctrine, if only evangelical leaders had devoted sufficient attention to the problem.

Yes, we realize how unpopular it has become to even notice let alone point out those emperors among us who have no clothes. Many church members will object to hearing anything that criticizes another point of view, much less a specific teacher. A pastor who "names names" risks being branded a spiritual McCarthyite, or a heresy hunter. But this is a small price to pay for protecting the flock. We also realize how dangerous it can be to some ministry careers to take on Gothard. In some regions Gothard's teachings are so pervasive and so entrenched that his Institute has become a virtual denomination in diaspora, and his pronouncements are received with ex cathedra authority. Scores of churches have Gothardite factions in their pews, which are frequently responsible for church splits, lost friendships, and untold heartache. (Doctrine may, and often properly does, divide. But error splinters, fragments, and scatters.) Pastors, elders, and deacons who find themselves in such situations need to carefully consider all their options, and realize that in some cases resigning and moving on may be the only ultimate option – but no option should be exercised without taking a clear stand for biblical truth.

Finally, we also realize the risk of extremism. Extremism in the defense of orthodoxy is, unfortunately, no joke. It probably causes almost as much spiritual destruction as the errors of Gothardism do. Some people cannot distinguish between truth that is essential to the faith and truth that is peripheral to it, and to

encourage the likes of them to mount their pulpits and expose any heretic is to open a Pandora's Box. They won't know where to stop, and eventually they and their congregations will be the only true Christians left on the planet (although they won't be too sure about their congregations)! Thus we add this final caveat: those who cannot abide by the saying, "In the essentials, unity; in the non-essentials, liberty; and in all things, charity," have no business preaching or teaching God's word, and should seek out a different profession.