

The Blinding and Binding Teachings of Bill Gothard

by Paul Sue

A Matter of Basic Principles: Bill Gothard & the Christian Life by Don Veinot, Joy Veinot, Ron Henzel. 21st Century Press, 2002.

It's probably safe to say that most Christians in North America have heard of or have even attended one of Gothard's seminars. Because of the popularity and mass appeal of Gothard's ministry, attempting to question it or criticize it is to face the wrath and anathema of the legion of loyal (blindly loyal in some cases) fans. Gothardites get angry and defensive when you question their beloved leader's teachings or integrity, as if he is somehow beyond reproach or accountability. To such die-hard supporters, this book will, I'm sad to say, do little to sway them from their steadfast adherence to Gothardism: a case of the blind leading the blind (though you still should encourage them to read this excellent book and pray for them!).

However, for those who are open-minded, willing to study the Scriptures for themselves, and willing to engage in calm discussion without resorting to name calling and angry rhetoric, this book can help them find true freedom in Christ. It is fairly written, well-researched (includes meeting with Gothard on a number of occasions), carefully reasoned, and **endorsed** by well known seminary professors, apologists, cult researchers and pastors. The authors have demonstrated charity and forbearance towards Mr. Gothard and his staff, both in personal meetings and in their correspondence. Gothard on the other hand, has broken promises, resorted to stonewalling, spread misinformation, **threatened lawsuits**, and generally not acted in a biblical and loving manner.

The authors are with **Midwest Christian Outreach**, "a non-denominational, evangelical organization that exists to intelligently present and compassionately defend the Gospel of Jesus Christ, especially to those who consciously reject it due to false beliefs, and to challenge and equip believing Christians to do the same."

The book begins with a brief overview of the historical developments of the American religious milieu to set the background for the genesis of Gothard's *Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts* (now IBLP, *Institute in Basic Life Principles*). The authors do praise Gothard's early and humble efforts to reach the troubled youth of the turbulent 60's. Parents obviously appreciated Gothard's teachings as an antidote to the rebellious anti-authoritarian attitudes of the hippie culture, and soon his seminar attendance swelled, and unfortunately, so did Gothard's head. Already in his early days of ministry, he was accused of "spiritual pride" (p. 42), though at the time he was humble enough to confess it.

However, as his ministry continued to grow, problems began to emerge as well. In the mid-70's, Bill Gothard's brother (who was at the time the vice-president of the ministry), was involved in sexual misconduct with several ministry employees, though Bill chose not to deal with it. The scandal finally came out into the open in 1980. Dr. Samuel Schultz, professor of OT at Wheaton College and board member since 1965, resigned, stating:

In May 1980 we were shocked to learn of gross immorality that had prevailed for years among the staff under Bill's supervision as president. Bill failed to share this information with the board nor did he seek their counsel. By the end of that year it became apparent that Bill continued his authoritarian style of leadership, dismissing those on the board as well as staff who disagreed with him. Consequently I found it necessary to resign.

Earlier, Gothard himself had indecent contact with some of his female staff, and "admitted in staff meetings that these actions were 'moral failures' on his part." (p. 54). I think the biblical term is "sin", not just "moral failures". However, the authors are not trying to be sensationalistic, but rather, simply pointing out Bill's style of leadership, especially his reluctance to deal with matters in a timely and biblical fashion, his dogmatism and authoritarianism, his lack of integrity, and his increasing tendency towards a legalistic reading of the Bible. With respect to the latter point, Bill Gothard's penchant for taking passages out of context, and his misunderstanding of basic hermeneutical principles have resulted in an assortment of bizarre and aberrational teachings that have alarmed many in the evangelical community. Dr. Ronald Allen, Professor of Bible Exposition at Dallas Theological Seminary, attended a Gothard seminar in 1973 and wrote of his experience:

In this seminar, I was regularly assaulted by the misuse of the Bible, particularly of the Old Testament, on a level that I have never experienced in a public ministry before that time (or since). (p. 64)

Dr. Allen has tried unsuccessfully for over 20 years to meet Bill Gothard:

Although Dr. Allen extended to Gothard for over twenty years the offer to meet anywhere at anytime at his own expense if necessary, including lunch or dinner, no meeting was forthcoming. Bill Gothard steadfastly refused to meet with Dr. Allen ... (p. 66)

This reflects Bill Gothard's staunch refusal to be corrected or to be held accountable, his consistent trademark throughout his career. Instead of answering his critics' concerns, he insinuates that his opponents don't have the special insight into Scripture that he has (see page 100). The authors are correct that Gothard has created an "Evangelical Talmud" for Christians, claiming his novel interpretations as binding Biblical commands:

Of course, we are all guilty of misapplying Scripture from time to time. We are taking that into account. The concern we and others have is that, with Gothard, abuse of Scripture happens so frequently and seems to have gotten much worse in recent years. The elevation of his personal opinions to the status of scriptural authority extends into medical advice (Cabbage Patch dolls interfering with the birth of children), adoption (tracing family lineage to bind ancestral demons), and other mystical elements (hedge of thorns, umbrella of authority/protection, sins of the father). (p. 102)

If it was just a matter of academic exercise that we disagree with Gothard's teachings, one might choose to discount the criticisms. However, harmful teachings can dramatically affect lives, families and churches; in the case of Gothard's teachings, they have been the cause of much personal trauma, the cause of family breakups, and the source of church divisions. The book gives several examples, including the case of a pastor who Bill wooed away to supposedly begin a new ministry (the story is told on pages 211-223). In the end, "after all of the broken commitments and disillusionment with the ungodly way IBLP was administered" (p. 223), the pastor resigned, having still not received the balance of the money that was owing to him. Oh yeah, did we mentioned the lack of financial integrity of Gothard's ministry?

In Chapter 8, the authors tell another story, this time of a devoted Gothardite couple, who volunteered to help out with a log cabin program for juvenile delinquents that Gothard was planning. Soon enough, problems arose: it turned out that Gothard's ministry had failed to comply with state building code regulations. Instead of acknowledging the problem, Gothard adopts his usual strategy of shifting blame, obfuscating the issues, slandering his critics, and accusations of rebelling and fault finding (see the excellent list of Gothard's conflict resolution style on pages 232-234). How hypocritical for a ministry that preaches "obeying authority" so much, to ignore the authority of the laws of the land! In the end, the couple

ended up paying additional expenses out of their own pocket in order to fix the problems due to IBLP's negligence. In an incredible act of arrogance, dishonesty, and mean-spiritedness, Gothard's staff "went under the cover of darkness to remove Institute property from the premises. Subsequently, they sent a letter ... demanding to the [couple's] attorney demanding reimbursement for lost income and expenses related to the property." (pp. 245-246).

Gothard has attempted to bring his legalistic teachings into all areas of life. Indeed, one can now submit all aspects of one's life under the umbrella of Bill Gothard's absolute authority: use of cosmetics, clothing, beards, sleep schedules, homeschooling, courtship and marriage, and even medical advice (see Chapter 10, *Bill Gothard - Medicine Man*).

What emerges as one reads the book is the unbendable, unquestionable authority that Gothard wields over his staff and his dutiful followers. The total lack of accountability and resistance to correction also characterizes Gothard's "ministry". Ironically, in light of what he teaches, Mr. Gothard does not exhibit a teachable spirit; one notes a total lack of references to other books and scholars in his published materials. While this may give an impression of spirituality ("we let the Bible speak for itself") that appeals to certain minds that are distrustful of biblical scholarship, it actually reflects a "Lone Ranger we know-it-all" attitude. Even when it comes to scripture verses, Gothard seems to use the KJV only, even when other translations could help clarify the meaning.

Furthermore, Gothard has a simplistic and reductionistic approach to the Christian life. He has managed to reduce biblical discipleship into a number of "non-optional" life principles. It is striking that Gothard's teachings are totally devoid or deficient of grace. His perspective on the Bible is legalistic and moralistic, not the Christo-centric or cruciformic viewpoint that Paul expounds. There is little teaching of the empowering presence of the Spirit to enable us to live godly lives. This is a very significant point: grace, Christ, the Spirit and the cross figure very little in Gothard's scheme for Christian living. Gothard perhaps needs to take note of Paul's polemics with the Galatian Judaizers.

We have already made mention of Gothard's inconsistent and incoherent approach to biblical interpretation. He is guilty of consistently taking verses out of context and proof-texting. He totally disregards the redemptive-historical dimension of Scripture, and reads the Bible "flatly" instead, thereby making all manner of incorrect applications from OT texts. (It is instructive to note how Gothard prefers citing the OT over the NT.) Instead of trying to understand a text in its historical, literary and theological contexts, he searches for aphorisms - and he finds them everywhere!

People will say that we shouldn't criticize a ministry that seems so successful and has "God's blessing" on it. First of all, a ministry's success is not measured according to the world's standards (i.e. numbers, finances, and glowing testimonies). Secondly, it is presumptuous for us to claim "God's blessing" on any ministry - we're not God! We shall all have to await *His* assessment at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Our goal now is to be faithful to the Word and accountable to one another. Lastly, we are called to be discerning and not to just blindly accept any teaching that comes our way. Even the apostle Paul's message was scrutinized by the Bereans - and they were commended for doing so (Acts 17:10-12); surely Gothard is not putting himself above the apostle Paul, is he? Questioning or criticizing Gothard's teachings does not mean we are judging him as a person.

In the book's Epilogue, the authors explore the issue of leaving an authoritarian or spiritually abusive group and the attendant difficulties involved. They note that:

[p]eople who find themselves in this deep become afraid to point out even serious problems they find along the way. If they recognize some signs of spiritual abuse, hypocrisy, or oppression, their minds tend to reject this input out of fear of reprisal or condemnation for presuming to judge the leader or leaders supposedly anointed or specially anointed by God. They will blame the victim; indeed, they will blame *themselves* before they will dare to find fault with such a 'godly' man as the leader or leaders. This is very common with authoritarian groups." (p. 315)

Furthermore, Gothard's strategy is to ignore your questions and concerns and counterattack instead:

Critical questions are not answered in a reasoned fashion. Rather, the response is crafted in such a way as to suggest that questioning itself indicates a rebellious spirit. To question "God's appointed man" is tantamount to questioning God. This mindset is very difficult to overcome. (p. 316)

The authors go on to list other reasons why people refuse to leave an authoritarian or abusive group, even when the evidence is overwhelming:

- they've invested too much (time, money, effort, emotion) in the group and are afraid to leave
- fear of ridicule from others; fear that if they were wrong about the group, then they have wasted their lives (p. 321)
- fear of catastrophic events if they were to leave the protective umbrella of the group; they've been brainwashed into believing that the chain of authority to God goes through their leader (the "fortress/remnant" mentality)
- the people in the group seem so nice
- afraid of being shunned by family and friends, most of whom are in the group (usually people who join authoritarian groups tend to be isolationists)
- afraid of being cut off from God

This book is an important read for all Christians, serving as a warning against legalism, authoritarianism and blind submission to fallible leaders. Furthermore, the book underscores the pressing need for **all** Christians to be more discerning in an age of biblical illiteracy, theological confusion, and false substitutes for the biblical gospel. It's not entirely Gothard's fault though. Church leaders have failed to train Christians to be discerning, by giving them the tools to help them understand the Scriptures for themselves. As I've stated elsewhere many times, present church structures help facilitate an unhealthy view of authority and spiritual dependence.

Then too, Christians themselves are partly to blame:

- fascination with novelty (*WWJD*, *Prayer of Jabez* or whatever is the latest bestseller or fad)
- laziness (why study the Bible when you can just follow a few "basic life principles")
- superstition (Cabbage Patch dolls are evil; Proctor & Gamble are satanic)
- sentimentalism (more influenced by *Touched By An Angel* and *Chicken Soup for the Soul* than Paul or John)

- moralism ("let's clean up our nation for God!")
- desire for a strong authority figure to give moral guidance and sense of security in our wicked society
- attraction to the personality cult (looking for charisma not Christ)

Until churches take seriously the task of equipping their Christians to study the Bible for themselves, and gain a deeper understanding and ability to discern truth from error, they will continue to fall prey to false teaching.

As I put the book down and paused to reflect on what I've read, Gothard seems so cartoonish that I felt like laughing - until I recalled the damaged lives and divided families and churches; then I felt like weeping instead.

Note: More [information on Bill Gothard](#) is available on Midwest Christian Outreach's website. There is even an Internet [discussion forum](#) dedicated to discussing the teachings of Bill Gothard. For a list of other links on Bill Gothard, please [click here](#).

<http://www.batteredsheep.com/gothard.html>