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# Christian Ungodliness

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— Keith R. Blades

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Take a look once again at the title to this article. Does it seem strange to you? Does it sound like an oxymoron; like two concepts that should not be linked together because they are usually considered to be mutually exclusive, or opposites? If so, you are not alone. The idea that there could be such a thing as *Christian ungodliness* strikes many saints as peculiar, if not preposterous. Ungodliness, it is often assumed, is only a trait of man in his natural state as an unrighteous sinner. Hence, the conclusion is often drawn that it isn't possible for Christians to be ungodly. Now though it is true that ungodliness is a trait of the natural man and the concept is used most frequently with regards to the unsaved, it is not exclusively so. Christians can be ungodly, and the reality of this is something that the Apostle Paul deals with throughout his epistles, but especially in the Pastoral epistles. For example, in II Timothy 2 Paul says,...

**15** Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

**16** But shun profane *and* vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness.

**17** And their word will eat as doth a canker: of whom is Hymenaeus and Philetus;

**18** Who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some.

(II Timothy 2:15-18)

The ungodliness that Paul is talking about here is not the ungodliness of the unsaved of this world. Rather it is ungodliness among the saints, as is evident from the context. It is the grievous issue, therefore, of *Christian ungodliness*, and it is the

focus of Paul's doctrine in this portion of II Timothy. It is also something that Timothy is all too familiar with, and that Paul declares would be on the increase. He even refers to and describes a particular example of it, along with the ones who are responsible for promoting it. In addition, Paul also cites the main causes for it and instructs Timothy on how to respond to both the causes and the ungodliness itself. Moreover, by describing the specific things that will doctrinally adversely affect Christians and in so doing will "increase unto more ungodliness," the Apostle Paul sets forth *Christian ungodliness* as a prevailing problem throughout this dispensation of God's grace.

*Christian ungodliness*, therefore, is not an impossibility. It should not be thought of as a preposterous notion. On the contrary, it is a real spiritual ailment, so to speak, with definite causes and symptoms, along with grievous effects and complications. But just as with many physical ailments, which can often be overlooked or misdiagnosed due to ignorance about the ailment, so it is with *Christian ungodliness*. The failure to understand exactly what constitutes ungodliness in God's sight is a reason why many do not recognize this particular spiritual ailment.

## Just What is Ungodliness?

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The word ungodliness is often thought of and used today as a synonym for unrighteousness, wickedness, and gross sinful behavior. This, in fact, is one of the main reasons why some find it difficult to readily equate ungodliness with Christians.<sup>1</sup> However, though this is the case today, that is not what the word means by definition. Wickedness and the like can be the

fruit of ungodliness, and indeed often are. However ungodliness itself is actually something else. It is something more fundamental, which in so being provides for it to bear fruit other than wickedness and vile sins.

The word ungodliness clearly denotes the opposite of godliness. And godliness, as the word states, is the issue of possessing *god-likeness* in accordance with what God said about man when He created him. As Genesis 1:26 makes plain, God created man to be a godly creature.

**26** And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

(Genesis 1:26)

When God said, “Let us make man...after our likeness,” He obviously did not mean that man would be godly (god-like) in the sense that he too would possess the character, attributes, and essence of God Himself. Instead, as the context develops and shows, man was created with a make-up and capacity that would allow him to have things in common with God. That is, to be like God in some very specific ways.<sup>2</sup> Briefly put, with a make-up corresponding to God’s, man was created to be godly in three specific areas: **1.** To think like God does; **2.** To do things God’s way; and **3.** To labor with God in what He is doing. These are the three fundamental components to godliness, with the inner man issue of thinking like God does being the crux of the matter.

Ungodliness, by definition therefore, is the opposite of this. It is the issue of *not* thinking like God does; *not* doing things God’s way; and *not* laboring with God in what He is doing.

When man sinned, as Genesis 3 describes, man by nature became an ungodly creature, with the details of the account in Genesis testifying to ungodliness in each of the three areas. Hence

ungodliness is the consummate trait of the natural man.<sup>3</sup> And as such, this is primarily what people think of when they think of ungodliness.

It should, however, be obvious that by definition ungodliness can be applied to God’s own people. For God’s people can think differently than God thinks; can fail to do things God’s way; and can fail to labor with God in what He is doing. Yea, this was often the case in God’s program with Israel, and especially so when the Lord was among them.

As the Gospel accounts testify, in view of the deeply corruptive effects of the vain religious system that had developed in Israel, the Lord had to expose its multifarious errors to His believing remnant so that they could think like their heavenly Father and do things His way. The law and the prophets had become so corrupted and mis-taught in Israel, with traditions and the commandments of men taking their place, that the believing remnant had no way of being godly. As God had said through Isaiah when dealing with the vain religious system,...

**8** For my thoughts *are* not your thoughts, neither *are* your ways my ways, saith the LORD.

**9** For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

(Isaiah 55:8-9)

In declaring this to Israel, the Lord was not saying that He being God thinks infinite thoughts, while the people of Israel being men can only think finite thoughts. Rather this is a rebuke to Israel, especially the religious leadership, in view of their apostasy from the law and the prophets. The people of Israel were God’s people. He gave them His law, spoke to them through His prophets, and taught them to walk in His ways. They were to be His godly nation in the midst of the Gentiles who had been consigned over to ungodliness. Their thoughts, therefore, should have been God’s thoughts, thinking like He does.

And their ways should have been God's ways, doing things like He does. But instead of being godly, they themselves were ungodly. Hence when the Lord came to His nation He exposed the ungodliness of Israel's vain religious system, made the law and prophets honorable amongst His remnant, and in so doing gave them the capacity to be godly. This, in particular, is what the Lord's sermon on the mount is all about, with all of its corrective doctrine.

Ungodliness, therefore, can afflict God's own people. Through neglect of the Scriptures, improper or dishonest Bible handling, heeding false teaching, following traditions and the commandments of men, and the like, saints can be ungodly. They can fail to think like God does; not do things God's way; and fail to labor with God in what He is doing. And this is possible not only in God's program with Israel, but also with us in this present dispensation of God's grace.

### **The Impact of the Dispensational Change**

In truth, the potential for God's people to be ungodly has actually increased since God suspended His program with Israel and brought in this present dispensation of His grace. And the Adversary knows it. The great dispensational change that God has made in view of the revelation of "the mystery of Christ" has naturally made an impact upon what comprises godliness in this dispensation. To think and act like Israel's program is now in effect is all it takes to produce *Christian ungodliness*.

In accordance with "the mystery of Christ" God has now revealed some things that He has been thinking about since before the world began, but that He had kept "hid in himself" since that time. God also has a way of dealing with us in this dispensation that is different from the way He dealt with Israel in His program with them. And naturally having suspended Israel's program, God is not now laboring to fulfill that program, but instead He has a completely different agenda of

operations in this dispensation. Hence in view of the fact that in this dispensation God is thinking differently than in His program with Israel; has a different way of doing things than in His program with Israel; and is laboring to accomplish different things than in His program with Israel; it is quite easy for *Christian ungodliness* to exist. And it can exist even though Christians are sincere, zealous, and excited about serving the Lord.<sup>4</sup> Indeed when Christians simply fail to "rightly divide the word of truth" in accordance with God's two distinct and different programs, (and thereby think that Israel's program is in effect today; do things in accordance with Israel's program; and labor to bring about the objectives of that program), they end up being part of the *Christian ungodliness* that Paul describes and deals with in the Pastoral epistles.

### **Godly Edifying**

In the opening verses of I Timothy Paul makes it emphatically clear that "godly edifying" is what God wants for every Christian. Godliness, therefore, is the goal of the edification process.

3 As I besought thee to abide still at Ephesus, when I went into Macedonia, that thou mightest charge some that they teach no other doctrine,

4 Neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith: *so do*.

(I Timothy 1:3-4)

However as Paul also makes clear and plain, "godly edifying" is the result of sound doctrine. Not just Bible doctrine, but *sound* Bible doctrine. Bible doctrine that recognizes God's two different programs, "rightly divides the word of truth" in accordance with them, and keeps God's program and dealings with us today distinct from His program and dealings with Israel. Hence as Paul declares in verse 11, sound doctrine that is "according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which was committed to my trust" is what

Christians need to hear, understand, believe, and operate upon. Otherwise the various and same kinds of *Christian ungodliness* that confronted Timothy and ensnared saints at the beginning of this dispensation, will continue to do so with relative ease.

Now there are numerous forms of *Christian ungodliness*. However as Paul sets forth, the vast majority are the result of either failing to “rightly divide the word of truth” and/or failing to understand and appreciate the unique operations of God’s grace in accordance with sonship in this dispensation. Indeed, the first form that Paul deals with in I Timothy — the ungodliness belonging to those who desire to be “teachers of the law” — underscores the reality of this.

In view of the fact that God has not put us “under the law” but “under grace” in this dispensation,<sup>5</sup> it is nothing short of pure ungodliness for any Christian to think otherwise and to put himself under the law. Hence those Paul cites in I Timothy 1 who were doing so and were “desiring to be teachers of the law” were not godly at all, but were ungodly. Regarding the issue of living a sanctified life unto God they had “turned aside unto vain jangling.” And so instead of thinking like God does with respect to sanctification, and doing things God’s way when it comes to living unto Him in this dispensation, and laboring with God in what He is doing today, they were “understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm.” As such they were ungodly Christians, whose “other doctrine” regarding the law actually provided for *ungodly edifying* in those that heard them. And this primarily because they failed to “rightly divide the word of truth.”

And the same is fundamentally true for all the other forms of *Christian ungodliness* that Paul deals with throughout the Pastoral epistles.

An oxymoron, though it sounds like a contradiction of terms, actually conveys important information by means of its apparent contradiction. In this case *Christian ungodliness*

declares the grievous and shameful situation that exists when we fail to “rightly divide the word of truth” and/or fail to appreciate and adhere to the unique operations of God’s grace that belong to our sonship in this dispensation.

In view of the privilege of God’s grace that it is for us in this dispensation to have “the mind of Christ,” to be dealt with as adult sons, and to be involved in “the mystery of godliness,” it truly is nothing less than a shame when we possess or exhibit any form of *Christian ungodliness*. — *Keith R. Blades*

<sup>1</sup> Even though Christians certainly can walk contrary to our identity “in Christ,” fulfilling the lust of the flesh and yielding their members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin. Cf. I Corinthians 3:3; 5:1-13; 6:1-20; II Corinthians 12:20-21; et al.

<sup>2</sup> The issue of man’s creation as a godly creature is a fascinating subject, especially in view of Satan’s plan of evil to be “like the most High,” and in view of his temptation of the woman and Adam to be “as gods.” The Divinely designed godliness of man is a subject about which Satan knows a great deal. Hence he also knows how important producing ungodliness is when it comes to him achieving his objectives, including those in his policy of evil against God’s people. Indeed, producing ungodliness is a primary goal in Satan’s policy of evil against us in this dispensation.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Romans 1:18ff

<sup>4</sup> Though sincerity and zeal are often talked about as more important than doctrinal correctness, (e.g. “What you believe isn’t all that important, just as long as you are sincere and desirous of serving the Lord.”), this is clearly not what God says. Zeal, sincerity, and the like do not excuse error. Cf., for example, Romans 10:2; Galatians 4:16-18. Moreover, as with the Galatians, Paul knew that zeal can easily be used to cover up, or divert attention from, doctrinal error.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Romans 6:14ff; Galatians 3-4; et al.