

Unauthorized and Ruinous Opinions

by E. G. Sewell

Paul says: " But foolish and ignorant questionings refuse, knowing that they gender strifes." (2 Tim. 2:23). With the plainness of the New Testament on all matters of faith and , practice, it is astonishing that there should be so many unfounded opinions rising up among those claiming to be the followers of Christ. An opinion is a notion, idea, impression, view, or judgment formed, for which there is no direct testimony or information found in the oracles of God upon which to base it. There is a vast difference between faith and opinion. Faith is the belief of what is stated in the word of God. Whatever the word of God plainly says should always be regarded as a matter of faith-for faith, belief, comes by hearing the word of God. If all would study and appreciate the difference between faith and opinion, and would be careful to always use these words according to their legitimate meaning, and never confound their meaning by using one when the other should be used, very much of the trouble and division that now exists in the religious world might be avoided.

Opinions are always more or less matters of ignorance. Those who form and express them do not and cannot know them to be true; for if these opinions were anywhere stated in the word of God, then they would not be matters of opinion, but of faith, for we are required to believe what the word of God, says. Hence, opinions should never be talked, taught, or argued as matters of faith. Men who hold and argue opinions are adding to the word of God. They lead people to accept and regard them as the word of God, when they are only the words of uninspired men.

Moses says: "The secret things belong unto Jehovah our God; but the things that are revealed belong unto us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law." (Dent. 29: 29.) The " secret things " spoken of in this passage mean things not revealed to us. These all belong to the Lord, and not to us. We have no concern about such things, and nothing to do with them. If we knew every truth not revealed in the word of God, these would not save us. It takes the things that are revealed to save. So it is a loss to men to be spending time over things not revealed, not expressed in the oracles of God. Everything the Jews needed to know as to the service of God was given in the law, in the Old Testament, and could be known and understood by all who desired to know them, and they could

have obeyed that law so as to become a prosperous and happy people. The law given through Moses was, indeed, the only thing that could have made the Jewish people prosperous and happy, and the only thing that could have made them obedient to God. He revealed to them plainly all that he wanted them to do, and nothing but that would have sufficed.

The Jews, however, were forever trying something else, but it always brought a curse upon them instead of a blessing. If they could have known everything else in the world, except the law, and left that out, they still would have been condemned. They tried almost everything else within the range of their thoughts, and still they were condemned. Had they spent their time in learning and doing what was plainly written in the law, they would have been the most happy and prosperous people the world ever saw while it was in force. But, instead of that, they were forever doing things plainly condemned, or not revealed in any way, and were thus continually bringing condemnation on their own heads. We ought to see that, and take warning against following opinions instead of what is plainly written in the New Testament. All that God wants us to do is plainly written there. If we reject that, no matter what else we do, we are as sure to be condemned as the Jews were when they rejected the law and did something else.

The great foundation of human opinions in religion lies in the fact that so many people are not satisfied with the word of the Lord as it is. It takes so much self-denial and so much practical devotion to go to heaven, according to the word of the Lord, that people do not like to submit, and are trying continually to find some other way they think will do as well. Some brush the whole thing out of the way, and say: "There is no God." David says this is what "the fool hath said in his heart." According to this, there must be a good many fools in the world now, for there are many that say there is no God. One thing this claim does is to cut them loose from any responsibility to any power or being higher than themselves. But what is this worth to them? Everybody in this Bible land knows that this claim makes people worse instead of better. It takes away all fear of retribution, of punishment here or hereafter, and leaves man as his own god and his own judge.

This breaks down the dominion of conscience, and leaves man to decide in and of himself what is right for him to do; and as to wrong, the idea that there is no God makes anything right a man wants to do. It destroys all idea of wrong and all responsibility for wrong, since there will be no one to administer punishment for wrong doing hereafter, even if there is any such thing as wrong; and, besides, if

there is no God, there is no hereafter for man, and no one there to be punished. There is nothing in the world in such an idea to make any one good, nor to hinder any one from doing anything he wants to do. Such an idea takes all the brakes off of conscience, so that it will not reprove us for anything, so far as eternity is concerned; for there is no eternity if there is no God-no eternal life, no eternal death. To deny God is to deny all truth, deny that man is anything but an animal, or that there is anything for man after death, any more than for a dog or a lion. Is there anything in such ideas to uplift man, to give him any aspirations to make anything more of himself in this life than a pig or a butterfly? There is something in believing in God and believing the word of God. It shows some design in the universe, some purpose in human life, something to stimulate aspiration and to lift man above the mere animal creation and to show himself worthy of existence. But suppose the idea is correct that there is no God, what is gained by it that is worth anything? Simply nothing in the world. On the other hand, everybody would dwindle down to mere animal selfishness, in which might would make right, and love and mercy would soon be lost, and the world soon be full of demons in human form, and human life the greatest misfortune that could befall, and the world would soon be a scene of corruption and misery.

But everybody in Bible lands knows that society is made incomparably better, purer, and holier by believing and obeying the Bible, believing in God and all he says, than those who deny, or who have no knowledge of either God or the Bible can possibly be. So every influence for good that the Bible and the Christian religion accomplishes proves the falsity of the claim that there is no God. Such an idea is not only an absurdity, but a blight, a cloud of darkness that all the wisdom and intelligence of a thousand such worlds can never dissipate or remove. And, besides, if the infidel idea should turn out to be correct, the Christian will be just as well off at death as the infidel. But, on the other hand, if it be true that God exists, and that the Bible is true, then the unbeliever is doomed in eternity beyond the possibility of a doubt. So an advantage, both in time and in eternity, are with the man that believes and obeys the Bible. So if there were no God and no eternity for man, it is ten thousand times better in this life to believe and practice the Bible. The false and foolish idea, therefore, that there is no God cannot possibly bring any good to man in any sense in the wide world. It brings only evil, and that continually and forever-and the greatest evil that could be imagined, at that.

The darkest, gloomiest, and most uncalled-for blight that has ever cast its murky clouds over this earth is surely the shriveling, pinching, awful blight of

unbelief! To believe what the Bible plainly says about the creation of the heavens and the earth and of man, and the history of the human race; of the origin of sin, and of death on account of sin, also the ruin that sin is continually bringing upon man; and of the happiness, the elevation, the purity of heart and life that faith and obedience have always brought, is inspiring, uplifting, satisfying, encouraging, and consoling, beyond the power of tongue or pen to express. But the history of unbelief and unfaithfulness both to God and to man that the Bible records gives the darkest shading that disgraces every feature of the whole history of man on earth.

On the other hand, the brightest pages of the whole history of man are, the accounts given of the men and women that believed in God and obeyed his word—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; Moses, Caleb, and Joshua; Othniel, Deborah, Barak, Gideon, Samuel, and David, with a perfect host of others of Old Testament times, together with John the Baptist, Peter, James, John, Paul, and a great number of others that we cannot name, whose beautiful and godly lives make the only true light that belongs to the picture of humanity on this earth. The man that lives in a land of Bibles, and who has had the advantages of Bible instruction and of the history of the Man of Galilee; what he has done for the redemption of man on earth; and, in spite of all this, still says there is no God, no Creator of the heavens, the earth, and of man, and no hope for the future, is assuredly the darkest, most benighted and hopeless member of mankind that the world holds to-day; with scarcely a possibility that the dark mists and fogs of ignorance and folly that have settled down on him will ever be scattered so as to allow the bright light of heaven's truth ever to illumine his heart.

But there is another assumption, another ignorant and foolish opinion, that there is not a word of foundation for in the Bible, that is likely more dangerous to society than the one just presented. That is Universalism—the claim that all men will ultimately be holy and happy. It is more dangerous than avowed infidelity, in that Universalists claim the Bible teaches it. When a man advocates something that blots out God and Revelation and obliterates heaven and hell, the people are afraid of him and avoid him, and this hinders his influence; but when a man starts up a cranky notion, opinion, and proposes to prove it by the Bible, people will more readily listen to him, and this gives him a much better chance to deceive.

The claim, however, that the Bible teaches this absurd opinion is false. There is not a passage in that-inspired volume that expresses or in any way teaches any such thing. Ask a Universalist to show you a passage that says all men will be

ultimately holy and happy, or a passage that expresses that the idea, and you silence him. There is no such passage. If there were, then you would have a palpable contradiction; for Jesus said of the wicked: "And these shall go away into eternal punishment: but the righteous into eternal life." (Matt. 25: 46). This passage plainly declares eternal punishment for the wicked; and if a passage could be found that teaches in any language that all will ultimately be holy and happy, then you simply have a contradiction that could not be explained away, for in the passage quoted there is a double denial that all will be finally holy and happy. It not only says the wicked will go into eternal punishment; but in the same sentence there is another class, the righteous, and the righteous only, who shall go into eternal life. The same word " eternal," expresses the duration of both the punishment of the wicked and the happiness of the righteous. So if the punishment of the wicked shall end, so will the happiness of the righteous. It is the same word in Greek, as in the above, that expresses the duration of both. Hence, if the punishment ends, so will happiness, so that there will no longer be happiness for them to enjoy. So this forever forbids the idea of any eternal happiness for the wicked; for if hell ends, so will heaven. Such an opinion, therefore as an end of the punishment of the wicked is simply and only an ' ignorant, untaught opinion that contradicts very many as plain passages as there are in the Bible, and, if maintained, would destroy all credence in the Bible.

But it may be asked: " What is the danger in accepting and relying upon this opinion? Simply this: Those who accept this opinion are not likely to deny themselves and faithfully live the Christian life as the word of God requires, and will not, therefore, be entitled to the promise of heaven, and will be lost, as will be the case with all who do not live the Christian life. Take away the fear of eternal punishment, and in nine cases out of ten you destroy faithfulness in the Christian life, and this will certainly defeat eternal life. On the other hand, the Christian that holds out to the end will have nothing to lose, even if Universalism should turn out to be true. The faithful Christian is safe in any event. There is always safety in that. But if it turns out that Universalism is false, which is bound to be the case, since it flatly contradicts the word of God, then there is nothing left but for those who rely upon it to be lost. So all the importance of eternal life depends upon repudiating this ignorant and foolish opinion, and sticking to a practical, faithful, Christian life, and then there is nothing to fear. The danger, therefore, is to him that relies upon an opinion that contradicts the Son of God. On the one hand, God places the inducement of eternal life to win man's heart and life to his service. On the other band, he places eternal ruin as the consequence of not doing the Lord's

will. God knew that these were necessary to be placed before men, or they would not have been so placed. The man, therefore, that in any way takes away the warnings that God has placed side by side with his precious promises takes away from the word of God, and exposes himself to the very thing he denies, which is eternal punishment. To either take from or add to the word of God endangers the eternal interests and deprives him of the hope of eternal life.

People do not realize what they are risking when they take up these opinions, which are not only not found in the word of God, but actually contradict it. This opinion cannot possibly save any one; and if any who hold it are saved, it will be because they do not teach it to others, but hold it entirely to themselves, and, on the other hand, faithfully serve the Lord in the gospel of Christ until death. What, therefore, is an opinion worth, that, if advocated, brings death because it misleads others, causing them to rely upon a false opinion as well as themselves? It is simply worth nothing in the world to any human being, as it cannot possibly save any one, and is in great danger of condemning all who embrace it. Those who espouse an opinion generally make a hobby of it and ride it to their death.

But these two assumptions are by no means all that are liable to endanger the eternal interests of men. Take creeds and confessions of faith of which there are many, both written and unwritten, and all unauthorized. In all these creeds there are many things enjoined upon their adherents that are not found in the word of God, and, therefore, are things added to that word. They proceed upon the principle that the word of God is not sufficient for the government of the children of God, and that it is their right and their business to add, to ordain, what God has failed to furnish in his word. Take the Methodist Conferences as an example, of which they have five altogether, each differing from the others. These are the general, the annual, the district, the quarterly, and the church conferences. They are all held at different times and for different purposes. The specifications and directions as to the holding of these different conferences cover thirty pages in the "Discipline" of 1902, which is before me. There is not one word of authority for any one of these conferences, either as to name or work. So all these thirty pages make just that much added to the word of God. In some of these conferences there is much legislating done, not a particle of which is authorized in the word of God. In fact, human legislation is the foundation of all creeds and of all denominational churches, from popery on down. The larger the creed, and the more legislation they have, the more thoroughly human they are.

The New Testament does not authorize human creeds nor denominational churches. These are all of human origin. Jesus built only one church, saying: "Upon this rock I will build my church." This church is called elsewhere " the church of God;" and when referring to more congregations than one, we have " churches of Christ." (Rom. 16: 16.) The one church of God and of Christ includes all on earth that have obeyed the gospel far enough to become Christians and are living faithfully the Christian life. These also compose the one church of God on earth, make up the one body of Christ. Christ has but one body, his loyal and obedient people. If denominational churches want to be the church of God, let them drop their human creeds and human names and all human legislation, and go back to their beginning and bring up whatever they lack of having obeyed Christ to the present time, and then go on and continue to serve God as the New Testament directs; then this much-desired end will be accomplished.

But it is astonishing how much would have to go if all in the Methodist "Discipline" were laid aside that is not found in the oracles of God. The thirty pages we have mentioned are only a few of the things contained in that " Discipline," and made binding upon that church, that are not found in the word of God. The churches of God need none of these things, and they would get rid of an awful burden if they would throw them all away, and forever after and in all these things live strictly as the word of the Lord requires. All the requirements made in the "Discipline" upon those people, that are not found in the word of God, make up that much that is added to the word of God. This will be a terrible load to carry to the judgment seat. Why not lay all such weights aside and cease to carry such extra burdens?

Now, if these people, carrying all these extra things, can get to heaven, there is no mistake about those getting there that simply take the word of God for their guide, do what it says, abstain from what it forbids, trust God's promises, and keep all this up to the end of life. People that are thus careful have the advantage of every other class of people in the world; for if it turns out that these humanisms are too weak to carry people to heaven, it will be awful for those who spend their lives trying to uphold them. But every one knows there is no danger to betide those that do the will of our Father in heaven, leaving out all human wisdom as service to God, either in the work or worship of the church.

Then, again, there are those that claim to take the word of God as their only rule of faith and practice, that build up humanly organized societies to sound out

the word, that organize endeavor societies and ladies' aid societies to do other parts of the work of the church, till so many of the members are absorbed in these different societies that there are scarcely any of the members that are doing anything simply and purely as Christians and in the name of Christ. Those that do not do the things God through Christ said do, and because he said it, are not doing them in the name of Christ at all. They have taken matters out of his hands, and are doing things through and in the name of human societies, and not in the name of Christ, with no promise of getting a particle of credit for what they do from him, for they are not working by his authority. This society business is as purely human as the tower of Babel was.

Jeroboam and the ten tribes sacrificed and offered to God the same offerings that God ordered through Moses when they began their kingdom. But they offered to their golden calves, and not to God, because it suited their purposes better. The whole thing was idolatry, because they offered them by their own wisdom instead of by God's directions, so they could thereby accomplish their own ends, their own way. Those who build human societies through which to spread the gospel, instead of doing that in the Lord's way and simply as the Lord's people, worship an idol of their own devising as thoroughly as did the ten tribes when they worshiped the golden calves ordained by their own wisdom. Anything put into the work or worship of the church that takes the place of something God ordained is as much the principle of idolatry as was that of the ten tribes, and is as much a rejection of God as their calf worship was, and is taking things into men's own hands as much as they did, by adopting their opinions in place of God's will.

Let these society brethren, therefore, lay these societies, these golden calves, aside, and do the work as Christians, as the church of God, and then he will accept it; they will then be doing all these things through God's ordinance, the church, and in the name of Christ, and they will be blessed. But these foolish and ignorant human inventions must be refused and the work done the Lord's way. Besides, these worldly-wise societies gender strifes, contentions, and divisions; so they are doing endless mischief, and there is but one remedy. These societies are really human creeds that, like all other creeds, will breed strife and division as long as they last, and will lie as an incubus upon those that build them up and run them. Christians are positively commanded to lay all such things aside, to refuse them; and until they do it, they will be guilty before God.

David could never have taken the ark to Jerusalem if he had not thrown away

his new cart and had the Levites to carry it. Let those who are free from these new carts see to it that they never take hold of them, nor of their heavy and dangerous responsibilities. There were no such things known in the days of the apostles, and the New Testament closed before any such things had appeared. Therefore, it is impossible to find one word of authority for these things. In fact, society people acknowledge there is no authority for them; they only claim them as a matter of religious liberty. Upon the principle that the tree is to be known by its fruits, the society is a bad tree, for there is scarcely any end to the divisions and strifes that have come up over it; and in many congregations where separation has not yet occurred, there is division of sentiment, contention, and sad troubles and in these divisions are yet to come.

All these troubles are over human opinions, fads, and inventions of men, all of which are bound to come to naught, and somebody will be sure to be hurt when the crash comes. Those who remain loyal to Christ in all things have nothing to fear in the outcome. The suffering will be on the side of the disloyal. So, brethren, let us continue loyal and faithful to the end, and all will be well. Those who do this have every assurance that the word and the promises of God can possibly give that they will be forever safe. While those who play with human inventions may go down, those who remain firm in loyalty and faithfulness to Christ are certain to be gathered into the eternal home.

This advantage will remain with the faithful and true followers of the Lamb regarding every human fad, error, or invention of human wisdom that ever has been, or ever will be, made. The plain truth of God's word always has been, and always will be, safe ground. Every error that religious people get up or fall into makes their eternal destiny more and more uncertain, while there is the most perfect safety to all who govern their lives by the word of truth. It is so strange that people will take up mere opinions not given in the word of God, or inventions on which the word of God is known to be silent, and push and run them with even greater zeal and earnestness than they do the things they know are plainly expressed and required. They think more of and about these mere matters of opinion than they do of the commands concerning brotherly love, the Christian graces, or of the best members in the congregation, who chance to be opposed to their untaught opinions. They get to thinking more of these inventions than they do of love to Christ or the church. Surely they have an unaccountable infatuation for these outside things. May the Lord deliver us all from such delusions.

— **Gospel Lessons and Life History**

