

## **What We Believe Determines What We Will Do In A Crisis**

by Rev. Tom Aicken

The errors of false religions (including secularism, paganism, all the 'salvation by works' religions, as well as the cults which purport to be Christian) grow out of wrong ideas about God – who He is, what He is like, and sometimes whether or not He even exists. It is interesting to note, however, that many of the errors within Christian groups, and sometimes causing friction between them, grow out of wrong ideas about man – not just about God, but more about man himself.

Why is it, for instance, that many people (even among those who profess to be Christians – and I do not doubt that they are) reject the doctrines of 'unconditional election', 'limited atonement' (also known as 'particular redemption', the idea of Christ dying to save some and not others) and 'irresistible grace'? These teachings are all revealed and amply supported by Holy Scripture, after all, so why are they not believed?

The answer, quite simply, is that these very people have not properly understood man's total depravity, the fact that, left to himself, man is dead in sin (Ephesians 2:1-3), that his carnal mind is enmity against God and cannot be conformed to the will of God (Romans 8:6-8). That is right. These people may love the Lord, what they have come to understand of Him; what they have not grasped is the extent of man's fall into sin and how it has left him, apart from the grace of God, utterly unresponsive to the call of God. As a result, these believers look for verses which appear to teach that man is not so bound by sin that he has lost his freewill, and for other verses which appear to teach that Christ died for everyone without exception, and of course for whatever else they think they can find to support the notion that anyone can choose on his own to come to Christ if he will but think it through and weigh the advantages of doing so.

Only when we understand what man is really, truly like, you see – how utterly corrupt and deceived he is to the core of his being – will we come to appreciate the sovereignty of God in salvation, that the Lord must indeed have mercy on whom He will have mercy (as we are told in Romans 9), and that He must first cause those elect souls to be born again in order to draw them and so move them to come to Christ (see John 3:1-8), or no one would ever otherwise turn to the Lord and be converted (see also Philippians 2:13).

This is why theologies differ within Christendom. It comes down to very different views of man. But this is also the reason that reactions differ within these groups to pressing needs and to a wide variety of crises that we may face in a fallen world. Let us examine homelessness as a case in point. We can all agree that homeless people need to be provided for, that they should be given temporary care and every helpful assistance until they find suitable employment and are able to provide for themselves. If we think that man is not so bad, that governments really care for such people, and that the homeless themselves really want a “hand up” to responsible, independent living (and not just a “hand out” to maintain the status quo), then we will probably view this helpful assistance as a permanent solution, something which over the course of time will get rid of homelessness altogether.

In point of fact, however, that understanding of the situation is very naïve. Hand-to-mouth assistance may have its place, and we cannot deny that, but it offers no permanent solution to the rapidly growing problem of homelessness in our day. On the government side of things, doling out taxpayer money for ill-conceived projects which repeatedly lead to one failure after another may look good to some, superficially, but nothing of any real value ever comes of it. On the homeless side, there is no one proposal which could ever suit everybody. The mentally ill need one kind of help and ongoing care. Drug addicts need another kind of help, rehabilitation which actually works and makes them productive. And those who are simply lazy – or, for whatever reason, are looking to take advantage of the welfare state – well, many of them may need retraining, and possibly a boot out the door when it is finished.

I am not being facetious. Missions to the homeless, however well-intended they may be, are not enough. They may be a help along the way, and for some people (a tiny minority) a very effective help, but they are not the solution that too many souls in this world of colliding ideologies seem to think. Man is not “basically good” as we so often hear, but his heart is deceitful and desperately wicked (Jeremiah 17:9). The sad fact is that when self-serving people take advantage of whatever power they have, apart from carefully managed checks and balances, things can only go from bad to worse. I am not suggesting that homelessness is an easy issue to solve, but the place to begin searching for a solution is in identifying and acknowledging the sinfulness of man.

Another case in point is the crisis that comes of economic collapse, the product of political manipulation by the self-appointed elite and of corruption at almost every level of government for the sake of what is seen to be for personal gain. Such a planned collapse of the economy brings massive unemployment, widespread starvation and all the social ills of a society in the process of imploding. Venezuela is a good example of that at the present time.

There are people, including many Christians, seeking to prepare themselves for just such a calamity in countries all around the world. They are stocking up on food and water and all the basic necessities of life they can possibly think of in order to see themselves and their families through the worst of those horrific times until, as they see it, they come out on top at the other end. Again, if we think that man is not so bad, that economic collapse is more a result of ineptitude than blatant corruption, then we will probably assume that the market will in time reset itself to a more workable standard and put that tragedy behind us.

Oh, but this, too, is naïve. There is a saying – “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely” – and that saying faithfully reflects the human condition. If indeed corruption succeeds at any level in its agenda, it does not abandon its mission but finds incentive to dive even deeper into it. What this means is that a planned collapse of the economy will not continue for just six months to a year, but for several years (perhaps even decades), a lot longer than any stockpiling of food could ever possibly last.

The heart of man is not fundamentally good, as we have seen, and politicians on a power-trip, with an insatiable thirst for even more power, money and fame, do not possess any natural desire for changing their ways. Once again, if an effective solution to an all-out economic collapse is anywhere to be found, it must first identify and acknowledge man’s total depravity. This does not imply that man is as bad as he can possibly be – there is such a thing as “common grace,” after all, a work of God upon the conscience which keeps even unbelievers from being purely demonic – but total depravity does mean that every faculty of the soul has been polluted by sin, and left to his own resources man is unable and unwilling to self-correct. What is needed, therefore, is not citizens “stocking up” but “standing up” and daring to resist the powers that be, even though that may also be at great personal cost.

What is needed in any crisis, besides a right view of God, is a right view of man, a realistic understanding of how human beings can be expected to respond or react in desperate circumstances. Historically, this is what has made the Reformed approach more effective and ultimately more satisfying than other proposed plans of action. I will outline this approach in three steps as follows:

(1) Let the people of God begin, and continue throughout, with prayer. “Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth” (Psalm 124:8). Pray “for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence” (1 Timothy 2:1,2). The Lord is “able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think” (Ephesians 3:20), is working all things together for good to those who love Him (Romans 8:28), and “is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth” (Psalm 145:18). How important it is to trust the Lord and to commit everything to Him who judges righteously! Consider carefully both what the Lord has promised (2 Chronicles 7:14) and what He has done (2 Chronicles 20:1-30).

(2) As it is a responsibility of civil government to protect its citizens from foreign invasion, from natural disasters and whatever other crises may come along, so it is a responsibility of the Church, in turn, to give moral and spiritual guidance to civil government in these matters, and to do it especially when that government is clearly moving in a bad direction (Matthew 28:20). In a time of crisis, particularly, let the body of Christ be very specific in her instruction of what may and should be done, offering her own constructive help and giving every encouragement to the governing authorities to act promptly and judiciously. This counsel may need to be repeated and even expanded from time to time.

(3) In the event that the civil magistrate will have none of it, ignoring or even blaspheming against every attempt of God’s people to make a difference, let the Church stand strong in her commitment and obedience to the law of God and offer steadfast resistance to every civil edict issued which is contrary to that law (Acts 5:29). This may well subject believers to arrest and imprisonment, and in extreme cases even to martyrdom, but it is faithful service, an effective witness, and it would not be an isolated event in history in which God used such a powerful testimony of His people to bring about much needed change and blessing for future generations.

