

GENERATIONAL SIN

To the Elders of the Duncanville Bible Church¹

Wilbur N Pickering, ThM PhD

Two of our elders made public reference last Sunday (10/22/89) to “generational sin”, and this gave me a handle on a situation in the church that has been troubling me for some time. Generational sin? Yes! But not only within families. There is generational sin in individual churches, in schools, in denominations and across wider segments of the Church. One very serious generational sin that is endemic across wide areas of the conservative/evangelical community at large is the idolatry that elevates human reason above the revealed Word of God. This idolatry expresses itself on many fronts, but perhaps the foundational one relates to the very Text of Scripture itself—I refer to the mentality that constantly calls into question the very wording of the Text, thereby undermining confidence in its integrity and authority.

Let me give a concrete, specific example of what I’m talking about. A number of weeks ago our pastor emended the Text of 1 Corinthians 8:3 from the pulpit. Instead of “*if anyone loves God this one is known by Him*” he suggested that perhaps we should read “*if anyone loves God this one knows*”. Since no printed Greek text has what he suggested I felt led of the Lord to warn him that such a proceeding was not advisable. His answer was to direct me to Gordon Fee’s commentary on 1 Corinthians, which was the source for what he had done. Fee’s commentary on 1 Corinthians 8:2-3 furnishes an unusually blatant example of the idolatry I have referred to. Consider:

The correct Text of 1 Corinthians 8:2-3, as attested by some 95% of the Greek manuscripts, reads as follows: Εἰ δὲ τις δοκεῖ εἰδέναι [86%] τι, οὐδεπῶ οὐδὲν ἐγνώκε καθὼς δεῖ γινῶναι. Εἰ δὲ τις ἀγαπᾷ τὸν θεόν, οὗτος ἐγνώσται ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ. The eclectic text presently in vogue, being followed by NIV, NASB, LB, etc., is based on a handful of Egyptian witnesses and reads like this: Εἰ ... τις δοκεῖ ἐγνώκειναι τι, οὐπῶ ... ἐγνώ καθὼς δεῖ γινῶναι. Εἰ δὲ τις ἀγαπᾷ τὸν θεόν, οὗτος ἐγνώσται ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ. The points at issue are underlined. It is the eclectic text that Fee uses as his starting point and is pleased to call the “standard text”. Had Fee recognized the correct text he could scarcely have written as he did. (But to do so he would have had to reject all that he was taught on the subject of New Testament textual criticism.) But he was not satisfied even with his ‘standard’ text—he proposes to emend it by omission in three places (see his page 367), and he does so on the basis of a single Greek MS, P⁴⁶. His text would be: Εἰ τις δοκεῖ ἐγνώκειναι ... , οὐπῶ ἐγνώ καθὼς δεῖ γινῶναι. Εἰ δὲ τις ἀγαπᾷ ... , οὗτος ἐγνώσται

P⁴⁶ contains most of Paul’s epistles and is usually dated at about 200 A.D. (which makes it our oldest extant MS at this place). It was discovered in the sands of Egypt some 85 years ago and scholarly opinion seems to be agreed that it was produced in Egypt. Now at that time (200) the ‘Christian church’ in Egypt included at least eleven heretical groups that were so well defined that they had names—Valentinians, Basilidians, Marcionites, Peratae, Encratites, Docetists, Haimetites, Cainites, Ophites, Simonians and Eutychites—but the dominant force in the whole ‘Christian’ community was Gnosticism. The text of P⁴⁶ in 1 Corinthians 8:2-3 is simply a gnostic fabrication that was buried in the sands of Egypt for 17 centuries, but that Fee proposes to resurrect and present to the world as God’s Truth!

Now, let’s analyze Fee’s procedure. He started out with an eclectic Greek text based on less than 5% of the extant Greek manuscripts (around 700, here). Not content with that he proposes three omissions based on one Greek MS, against every other Greek MS (a. 700) and every ancient Version, including Egyptian MSS and Versions (except that the 3rd omission is also found in two other MSS). Notice that he does not discuss the evidence; there is no attempt to explain why or how every MS (except P⁴⁶) and Version comes to be in error here. His whole argument is in terms of subjective

¹ It broke up years ago.

considerations, of what he thinks 'fits the context'. In other words, Fee is elevating his own mental processes above God's Word. He, Gordon Fee, is going to determine what is the original wording of the Sacred Text on the basis of his own imagination. This is idolatry; it is perverse idolatry.

Now consider the implications for the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. If Fee is right, then the form of 1 Corinthians that the various Church Councils canonized is wrong. If the Church canonized the wrong Text, how do we know she was right in canonizing the book (1 Corinthians) at all? Not only that, the Church Universal has used and preserved the wrong text down through the centuries. Martin Luther could not know what the correct text of 1 Corinthians was—it was buried in the sands of Egypt (according to Fee). Neither could anyone else, at any time between 300 and 1930 A.D.—the true reading (according to Fee) had disappeared from the knowledge of the Church. Any and all translators and scholars in 1900 simply could not know what the true reading was—it didn't exist. Not only that, how do we know that a new papyrus, call it P²⁰¹, won't be discovered tomorrow that will have a variant at a point where up to now there is 100% agreement? And what is to stop Fee from telling us that that variant is really the original reading? In other words, if Fee is right we have no certainty and never can have certainty as to what is the true Text of Scripture. So why bother trying to talk about an inerrant Text in such a situation? And does not any claim about inspiration become relative?

Fee's treatment of 1 Corinthians 8:2-3 is only an extreme example of a mentality that pervades our churches. The margins of NIV and NASB are full of notes that undermine confidence in the integrity of the Text: "*some early MSS omit ...*", "*many ancient authorities read ...*", "*the earliest and best [worst, really] witnesses...*"; not to mention the brackets in the text proper that say to the reader that the enclosed material "certainly is not genuine". Why do they do this? Because they are following an eclectic text, and the editors of that text constructed it on the basis of subjective criteria, in turn based on false presuppositions. But no one of those editors believed the Bible to be God's infallible Word—indeed, they foisted plain errors of fact and contradictions upon their text. Would they not qualify as "sons of the disobedience" (Ephesians 2:2)? If so, it would mean that they were wide open to satanic interference in their minds. If anyone thinks that Satan would pass up such an opportunity to corrupt the Sacred Text he really doesn't believe what the Bible says about our enemy!

The phrase 'generational sin' implies that a whole generation is practicing that sin. It involves a very serious consequence: all subsequent generations receive that sin as part of their 'gene pool'; it is not perceived as 'sin', but as 'truth'. But being in fact a lie, it becomes a stronghold of Satan in their minds and is not questioned. The only deliverance from that sin comes when someone goes back to its beginning and analyzes and exposes the false presuppositions and reasoning that gave rise to the sin. But such a person should not expect to be well received. He will certainly be persecuted by the 'Establishment'. However, if he has a means of disseminating his findings, he can influence the future.

Now consider the consequences of this generational sin. It is difficult to really teach a Sunday School lesson anymore—there may be six different versions in the room and we start discussing the various texts and renderings; there is no authority for making a choice; no one knows for sure what God's word is! The footnotes, plus the versional differences (often significant), have undermined people's confidence in the integrity of the Text. If the preacher emends the Text from the pulpit, it is confusion compounded. The authority of the Scriptures has been undermined. Few have the confidence to stand up and say, "Thus says the LORD!" The practical result is that whenever some teaching of Scripture becomes inconvenient, for personal or cultural reasons, we simply talk around it, explain it away or just shrug it off. Unquestioned obedience to the normal meaning of the Text is now hopelessly out of fashion! After all, nowadays it is our reason and logic (tempered by our convenience) that is the final authority, the final arbiter—God's Word no longer rules over us; we rule over it (*à la* Fee).

Why should God bless our country, our church, our homes, our lives when we persist in such a pernicious form of idolatry?