



## Zane Hodges Quotes M. Charles Bell's Research on Scottish Calvinism: Inherent Contradictions of Federal Theology; The Present Danger of Losing the Message

And since the appearance of Kendall's work, another book has been more recently written and the title of this book is *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance* [Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1985]. The author is M. Charles Bell. He is a Presbyterian minister and this is the published form of his Ph.D. dissertation in (the University of) Aberdeen in Scotland.

Now what Bell does is, first of all, to take his stand with the thesis of R. T. Kendall. And then what he does is to trace the same problem in Scottish theology and what is called the federal theology of Scotland.

NOTE: Federal theology is another name for "covenant theology" and is descriptive of the tenets of Reformed or Calvinist theology. It is defined for us by:

**Clouse, Robert G. "Covenant Theology." In *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Edited by J. D. Douglas. Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 267:**

**Covenant Theology.** Sometimes called "Federal Theology," this system describes the relationship between God and man in the form of covenants. One of the features in the development of Calvinism, it was especially popular with Puritans and Reformed theologians of Germany and Holland in the latter sixteenth and during the seventeenth century. It holds that God entered into an agreement with Adam at creation, promising him eternal life if he would obey the divine commands. Adam failed by eating the forbidden fruit and thus plunged himself and his descendants into eternal death. To remedy this, God eternally entered into a second agreement with Christ on behalf of the elect, promising them forgiveness and eternal life on the basis of Christ's sacrifice.

William Ames became the leading British exponent of federal theology, which in a moderate form appears in the Westminster Confession.

Resuming now with Dr. Hodges's comments from audiotape:

Bell argues that the Federal theologians [in Scotland] got away from John Calvin's doctrine of faith and assurance just as assuredly as the Perkins tradition did in England. The result was that they landed themselves in a quagmire when they came to assurance and salvation and they created for themselves all kinds of pastoral problems for which they had no solution.

Both Kendall and Bell are coming out of a different strand of evangelical thought than I do. Their background, and in some respects their theology, diverges from my own. And yet in this very crucial area we are agreed. And we are agreed that the theology we propound is fundamentally the theology of John Calvin, however much of that theology may have been lost and distorted in subsequent centuries.

This is what Bell says in his book:

**Bell, M. Charles. *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance*. (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1985), 200:**

... the federalist scheme ("limited atonement" and supralapsarianism) means that one cannot proclaim the love of God in Christ for all, but rather must first preach law in order to convince an individual of his sin and to bring him to repentance and belief in Christ.

NOTE: What Bell is saying is this:



- If only a predetermined elect are saved, then pastors cannot honestly proclaim that the love of God through Christ is available to all men.
- Yet, in order to “call out” the elect the pastor must first preach that all have sinned.
- Having done this some may be convicted of their sin and seek salvation in Christ.
- But of those who believe in Christ, only the predetermined elect may be saved.
- The federalist’s usual approach for bringing sinners to repentance is to impose the fear of judgment, a point taken up next by Bell when he writes:

Fear of hell and judgment of God is used to bring the sinner to faith. Yet such an (order) is a refutation of the way of Christ, who sought to urge sinners to faith with the good news that God loves the world and, because of this love, he sent his only Son so that whoever believes in Him shall have eternal life.

Whenever God’s love and forgiveness are made conditional upon one’s repentance, a host of pastoral problems are sure to arise. Perhaps the most serious problem is the pastor’s own attitudes. **It is not uncommon for pastors to withhold not only God’s love and forgiveness, but their own acceptance and approval until they are convinced of a person’s sincere and sorrowful repentance.**

NOTE: The highlighted sentence brings the issue of “limited atonement” to critical point. The entire thesis breaks down when God’s love and forgiveness are withheld contingent upon repentance rather than simple faith in Christ. Here are some of the problems:

- When a pastor teaches “limited atonement” he may never assume a member of his flock is truly saved until that member continuously produces the alleged fruits of that conversion.
- Both the sinner and the pastor have to find some reason within the life of the individual which indicates that person is of the elect.
- Because of this approach, the emphasis is taken off the work of Christ and the grace of God, and instead placed on the works of the believer beginning with public repentance.
- Salvation and assurance are therefore not determined through the individual’s faith in Christ but in whether he and/or his pastor feel his fruits are sufficient to warrant that conclusion.
- Since the elect are the only ones who can be saved then only the elect can do good works and this breeds legalism.
- Further, everyone must also be wary of the danger of “temporary faith,” the idea that even a nonelect person may for a time produce fruits indistinguishable from those of an elect person.
- Consequently, the assumption is reached that if a person does not constantly demonstrate a repentant attitude accompanied by a consistent lifestyle of good works, then he is not elect but instead reprobate.
- This results in variations on the theme taken up by legalistic fundamentalists who say, “He had a head belief and not a heart belief.”
- Another tragic consequence is the plaintive assumption, “I will never be good enough to be saved.”
- These false conclusions are conceived right out of the heart of hell and although honestly believed they are wrong and produce self-imposed and self-induced misery.



- This blasphemy withholds the love and forgiveness of God through faith in Christ and prevents large numbers of people from entering into the royal family although they are members of local churches.
- Just as tragic is the circumstance of those who are saved but waste a lifetime of energy desperately trying to prove it.
- We are driven to the same conclusion reached by our Lord in His assessment of the hyper-Calvinist's first-century counterparts, recorded in:

**Matthew 23:13** - "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from men; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in."

Continuing with Dr. Hodges's quote of Bell:

Yet to make love and forgiveness conditional is not only a violation of Scripture, but also of common sense. An individual will always respond more positively to the one who offers unconditional acceptance. Indeed, such acceptance fosters repentance. On the other hand, if one requires proof of repentance before fully accepting an individual, one usually produces not repentance, but a hardened heart!

Dr. Hodges's final observations reflect upon this final quote from Dr. Bell's book:

That's a great couple of paragraphs if you ask me. And what I want to say then is that the concern with the issues that relate to the Gospel is a concern that reaches across ecclesiastical lines and professional lines and theological lines and there are people all over the evangelical world who feel that this is a major issue and that unless the professing church is very careful it is in serious danger of losing the message of God's love and unconditional grace.

6. What Dr. Hodges discerned fifteen years ago has continued to increase in its appeal to the masses and this theology has won over the leadership of mainline denominations, infiltrated their seminaries, and is taught from their pulpits.