

about this booklet...

The word 'commitment' is frequently heard in Christian circles. It is used to describe the choice a person makes to become a Christian, and the extent of their faithfulness thereafter. Certain modes of thinking have grown up around this usage which the author has dubbed 'commitment theology'.

This article argues that this 'commitment' approach has not been helpful in rousing the church to life, and that it may have more roots in the world's manner of thinking than in the Scriptures. It shows that God comes to his people with a message of judgment — a judgment concluded on the cross — rather than in a challenge to be different.

It shows how God has made the death of Christ his centre piece for the healing of our lives and that only the proclamation of this will produce a truly active faith. It shows that God will not share his glory with a 'faith' which is mingled with self-confidence.

Grant Thorpe was, at the time of writing this article, a staffworker with The Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students, a position he held for seven years. He had previously pastored Baptist Churches for 14 years. In these positions, and whilst on the staff of New Creation Teaching Ministry, he taught the gospel to people of all age groups and most denominations. He is presently pastor of the Coromandel Valley-Hawthorndene Baptist Church.



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'COMMITMENT THEOLOGY':

*Is it true,
and
can it deliver?*

Grant Thorpe

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PREFACE

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Most of the material in this booklet was first written for a publication of the Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students — Tapestry — and is reproduced here, in a slightly amended and expanded form, with the permission of the editors.

At that time, 1985, I was the staff-worker for the above organization, meeting tertiary students from many backgrounds, and observing a wide range of Christian activity as it affected students. It was surprising to me that the article received the wide response that it did. People from different denominations, Christians from ‘establishment’ and ‘alternative lifestyle’ backgrounds, and different age groupings have found that the material related to their situations. It has been copied in an ad hoc manner many times over.

The material still seems to be valid and necessary — though people who know my stance are inclined not to use what I have dubbed ‘commitment theology’, and so I do not hear it used so much. Amongst students it became something of a joke never to use the words ‘commitment’ or ‘challenge’ when I was around!

I trust that readers will treat the issue in the same manner as those with whom I worked at the time. Though not all agreed with some particulars of application, the matter was given careful attention, and I trust this was helpful to all. I am grateful that it can be printed now, and pray that it will increase our thanksgiving to God for his grace and sharpen our awareness of the way in which the Gospel can be dulled by an ill-placed trust in our ability to respond.

‘COMMITMENT THEOLOGY’:

IS IT TRUE, AND CAN IT DELIVER?

One of the most frequently heard words in Christian circles is the word ‘commitment’. It is used to describe both the choice made by a person to become a Christian, and the extent and consistency of a Christian’s allegiance to Christian activities thereafter. The forms of this commitment vary with different groups of Christians, but my concern at the moment is not with the forms but with the place given to the whole matter of human commitment — to God, or the truth, or whatever.

I suspect that the current preoccupation

with commitment has arisen in part because of the Western churches' need to come to terms with casual or merely formal acceptance of Christian propositions and codes. In some way, a distinction needed to be made between those who were Christians and those who merely professed to be. I question, however, if 'commitment' is an appropriate issue to tackle when Christian experience and behaviour are deficient. We need to enquire in two areas: firstly, as to what Biblical categories are being expressed (rightly or wrongly) by 'commitment', and secondly, whether the New Testament Gospel is being expressed or perverted by the present emphasis on 'commitment'.

Biblically, the word 'commit' is used either in the simple sense of performing an act, or in the sense of giving something over to another in trust. The English word can be used in a third sense, to 'pledge' or 'implicate'. This sense is not used anywhere in the Bible, but when people talk of Christian commitment, this seems to be what is meant. We can commit ourselves to God as a faithful Creator, and to his mercy as our Redeemer, but this is a far cry from promising to be a faithful follower. The Bible uses other terminology to describe human response to encounter with Christ and the Father, and we would be advised to consider these, and, for reasons I will suggest, forget

the idea of commitment altogether.

Those who first followed Christ were called disciples — or learners. They were called to leave everything and follow him, no matter what this entailed. Their learning was to be undistracted. Their positive response would properly be called obedience.

The difference between this and commitment is that the former emphasizes submission to another's will; the latter emphasizes assertion of one's own will. A study of discipleship teaching in the Gospels would show that disciples were not those who made much of their own commitment. Rather, the difficulties of following were clearly explained, when necessary, and those who stayed were those who found they could do no other. In effect, they turned aside from covert idolatry; the presence of Christ amongst them had exposed all forms of false trust. In Christ they had found the words of eternal life.

After the Resurrection, the apostles called on their hearers to repent and to believe in the Gospel. The result was that a large number believed and thereafter 'devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers'. The apostles devoted themselves to their ministry and encouraged others to do so. They particularly encouraged Christians to devote themselves to prayer.

Whenever we see somebody devoted to a cause or a person, we know there must be a motive. God acts of himself. He needs neither prompting nor incentive. Creatures, and especially sinful creatures, are a different matter. There is no outflow of good unless the root of evil is located and removed. I cannot imagine that the early Christians, knowing that their Messiah had been crucified, by them effectively, and for them, and knowing that he was now proclaiming forgiveness to them, would have had a very strong consciousness of their own commitment. The very ideas of repentance and faith involve turning away from all confidence in human endeavour to trust wholly in the faithfulness of another.

In Romans 6 the apostle speaks of being yielded to God and making our bodies instruments of righteousness. The background to this is that we are set free from sin, and have become obedient from the heart to the doctrine which has made its impression on us and to which we were committed. Note that the commitment here is not by us but by God — committing us to the doctrine, delivering us up to it or handing us over to it.

Those who obey the Gospel obey the law, and they obey the law because (and as) they obey the Gospel. Those who are disobedient to the truth of the Gospel disobey the law as well. So, when we encounter a lethargic

practice of Christian works, we should recognize that the Gospel has been dealt with in an empty manner. Disobedience must not be isolated as a behaviour problem, but as a turning away from the grace of Christ. Those who are apathetic don't need 'whipping up' to commitment. They need to be healed. Those who seek to help may have stern words to say, but they will not be words which subvert grace by ignoring the true area of rebellion.

The Bible speaks of holiness and sanctification, words which relate to the character of God, and of his people, but words which also have strong implications of belonging. Christians belong to God and are set apart for his purposes. Jesus set himself apart for the work of the cross, in order that we also may be set apart for God (John 17:19). Just as it takes a man to be a man, and a woman to be a woman, only a holy person can be holy. We can neither make ourselves holy nor become more so by our actions. It is by the mercies of God that we are told to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, and acceptable to God.

The Bible speaks of faithfulness to God and to the work of the kingdom in particular. Jesus, in his parables, commended those who were faithful. Paul also prized faithfulness in his fellow servants, and, of course, was aware of its scarcity. He saw it, however,

as the expression of love, as a fruit of the Spirit, and in his own case, as an expression of the mercy of God to him (1 Cor. 7:25; 1 Tim. 1:12—16).

I make reference to these categories, because they are the categories which people ought to have in mind when they use the term 'commitment'. Some will say that these are the categories they have in mind and that there is no difficulty in the term. My own observation suggests to me, however, that 'commitment' is being used in the sense of pledge, made by a person to God. It smacks more of the pious claim by Peter, prior to the crucifixion of Christ, that he would not abandon his Lord. Jesus' interest was not in what Peter thought of himself; rather, it lay in what he thought of Christ. The admissions of love Jesus sought from Peter after the Resurrection were of a very different order.

*The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought** says that the recent popularity of the term 'commitment' may be attributed to the existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre. Behind the widespread use of the term is the belief that man and his present experience are all that matter, and that what man makes of himself and his present is the only thing of any consequence. Could it be that Christians, sensing their loss of nerve and furtiveness of

action, have turned to the same dried up springs as the world?

Allan Bloom has dealt with the same issue in regard to life in America. He writes:

Commitment is the moral virtue because it indicates the seriousness of the agent. Commitment is the equivalent of faith when the living God has been supplanted by self-provided values. It is Pascal's wager, no longer on God's existence but on one's capacity to believe in oneself and the goals one has set for oneself.*

He refers also to Nietzsche, who 'sought with his value philosophy to restore the harsh conflicts for which men were willing to die, to restore the tragic sense of life, at a moment when nature had been domesticated and men become tame'.† We may observe that it is, rather, the immanence of God's judgements and the coming of his grace in that context — together with the outworking of that in our life — which supply us with 'the tragic sense of life', but in terms of a God who has engaged that tragedy and given us a hope.

Egotism runs deeply in us all, and it is easy for those who can appear righteous to profess their righteousness. If we call for commitment, we may do no more than provide an opportunity for the self—righteous to

* ed. Alan Bullock and Oliver Stallybrass, Fontana, 1977.

* *The Closing of the American Mind*, Penguin, 1988, p. 201.

† *ibid.*, p. 228.

become more so, and even more tragically, to hide the glory of grace from those who cannot see in the call to commitment any hope for their troubled consciences or relief for their unmanageable circumstances.

'Commitment' preaching promises much, but delivers little. 'Think what we could do if we were all devoted to God!' But the saints don't stay devoted to God — or they redefine 'devoted' until it means little more than maintaining the church or its missionary enterprise. This preaching appeals to the religious ego, and so perpetuates itself. But the glory of the Lord has departed from it, and God's people cannot give themselves to its demands.

The answer to apathy is not commitment preaching. It is judgement. Until we understand that we (ourselves, our country and our churches) are under judgement for our carelessness of God, we will understand neither the depth of our problem nor what should be done about it. What needs to be done was done centuries ago, on a cross. Our apathy was judged. Our feeble attempts to justify ourselves were ignored, and the Saviour of the world gave us freedom from our sins. By this action God himself committed us to a teaching which we obey from the heart. The question is: do we believe this Gospel — the Gospel which removes our stony hearts and replaces them with a heart of flesh?

I believe that we need to turn from our present emphasis on commitment as we would turn from heresy. It has some of the same overtones that circumcision had for the early church. It has to do with initiation, and it has to do with being committed to keeping the law or requirements of God.

Just as Paul warned the Galatians not to turn to a 'different Gospel' and the Philippians to 'look out for dogs' who put confidence in their own fleshly actions, so we need to be warned about our preoccupation with our own response to the covenant God has made with us. It is not just a matter of terminology but a whole ethos that has developed. We consider it desirable to 'challenge' one another to do this or that. We seem to presume that people have the strength to rise up and do the will of God.

Romans 6 includes the demand that we yield ourselves to God, but it cannot be construed as a challenge to commitment. Rather, from beginning to end, it is a call to consider the amazing action of God to set us up for righteousness through the cross, and to yield ourselves to our liberation from sin by God. When God's requirements of us are preached outside of this context or without this emphasis, the result is a heresy, and a deadly stupor settles over the people of God. Many Christians appear to have come to God

on the basis of their own commitment. This is the terminology they use and that is the perception they have of their relationship to him. They seem to be at the perimeter of the faith rather than at its centre.

Paul was concerned about the Corinthians because he suspected that their thoughts may be 'led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ' (2 Cor. 11:3). He had in mind preachers who were harsh in their demands and superior in their attitudes (vv. 19—21). Those preachers were undoubtedly presenting their message in terms of being faithful to God — but they were deceivers.

If it is true that we have a misrepresentation of the truth wherever the church is preoccupied with commitment, then that fact should be recognized and people should be directed back to the cross from which all true obedience and love flow. Many Christians have lived for so long with commitment theology that they now no longer recognize it as such and think that their meagre formal remembrances of Christ are true worship. They may be aware of an uneasy dullness in their life and a certain insincerity in their recommendation of the faith to others. They know deep down, however, that it is they themselves who are sustaining their so-called relationship with God and that he plays no active part at all as far as they can discern. This is a symptom of the heresy.

Those whose obedience flows from grace can worship from a full heart. They know God. They are not deflected from childlike love when they err because they know that their relationship was never based on their commitment. From the beginning, and until the end, it is God's grace in Christ that causes them to stand.

We can only have a true relationship with God if we have a true Gospel. We can only have a true ministry to others if we have a true Gospel. We will only have a true Gospel if we humbly wait on God to renew us in it. Our constant propensity as self—justifying humans is to turn anything into a means to justify ourselves — even the Gospel — except that God keeps his truth pure by delivering us up to our own folly. Our faith turns to chaff in our mouths and our vitality dries up. We are given up to littleness of vision and to more and more dependence on the ways of the world. These things are God's call to us to look again at the apostolic message and to know its vitality.

I can remember reading various studies on the cross, thinking to myself that these treatments were elementary and of no further practical use, because I had been a Christian for some time. What I thought I needed now were studies on holiness and practical Christian living; things in which I could be involved.

How wrong I was. God has made the cross his centre-piece for the welfare of the world and the healing of my broken life. He admits of no other palliatives which use a dynamic other than the dynamic of that cross. He wants no healing that calls on the pusillanimity of man. Both the study of the texts which detail God's commands to us, and the reading of our own hearts and history, show that God has no brief for people who ignore the death of his Son, no means of reaching into their need other than through the renewal of being raised with Christ. People who 'assume' the cross and proceed with the things they can attend to themselves have not truly read the New Testament.

The world has assumed that the death of Jesus Christ is irrelevant to the quality or continuance of its life, and therefore gives it no attention. Can it be true that the church, in its practice, has assumed that the death of Christ and the power of justification have no power to change the sinner? How else can we explain the eagerness to preach commitment? Commitment preaching plays around on the surface of things, and despite all its show of devotion, leads to a situation where people are doing little more than playing games — religious games, but games none the less.

We need to live daily in the glory of being

raised with Christ and freed from judgement. We need to show the people of the world that this is what God has done for them as well. We need to love as we have been loved and to show the world the life we have encountered and the God who has mastered us. To talk about commitment is to ask for a pledge, and that was never part of the covenant.

At the very functional level, we need to discern and reject cheap 'actional theology' which is only interested in people and what they can accomplish and enjoy. We need to attend constantly to the apostles' doctrine, and to let it address our consciences — not our wills first, but our consciences. Nothing will move the will definitively which has not first addressed and settled the conscience.

We should expect our teachers to be true to the New Testament Gospel, and to especially listen to those who are. But most of all, we should humble ourselves before the living God, who favours no person above another, asking that we may receive grace to stay simply in the truth and not be led into bypaths. Those who do these things will be those who have remembered that they were cleansed from their old sins, and they will not be unfruitful in the work of the Lord.