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From Arrowhead to Augsburg: Bill Bright in the Light of the Lutheran Confessions

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Editor's Introduction

Many months ago the author submitted this article to our office. I was hesitant to publish it at first, not wishing to be perceived as overly critical of a man whose life I have observed for twenty-five years with a great deal of admiration, especially because of his love of the Great Commission. Dr. Bright has encouraged me, both publicly and privately, in the work of evangelism, and has lived a long life of excellent character. The purpose for publishing this article is not to attack Bill Bright, a gentle and earnest man, but to seriously question his whole approach to the doctrines of Justification, Sanctification, and biblical Revelation. Since the events which prompted this article took place, a further revelation of Dr. Bright's seriously defective views of the Gospel appeared in his endorsement of the new book, *Evangelical & Catholics Together: Toward a Christian Mission* (Word: Dallas, 1995), where he, a signatory of the now famous document which grossly distorts the evangelical truth of Justification through faith *alone*, writes: "The joint statement by evangelical and Catholic believers in our Lord Jesus Christ has enhanced our efforts to reach the masses of the world with the gospel. I have no doubt that the population of heaven will be greatly increased because of this statement." In the light of such confusion (and that further generated by a support letter dated October 31, 1995, in which Dr. Bright promotes the idea of people now coming to faith in Christ through visions and revelations *outside* of Scripture) I came to understand the great usefulness of this article. Evangelical leadership needs to understand how serious the present defection from historic Protestantism really is in our time. Few seem to understand, and if they do, seem unwilling to express that understanding when an honored leader goes astray theologically.¹

Bill Bright is president of perhaps the largest evangelical “parachurch” ministry in the world—Campus Crusade for Christ. Recently, Mr. Bright informed those who read his “Bright Side” newsletter that he and others in the Crusade leadership would embark on a forty-day vigil of fasting and prayer. Friends and supporters were urged to send prayer requests.

After forty days of denial, the long expected report came. Others within the circle of Campus Crusade leadership, such as Vice-President Steve Douglass, according to the “Bright Side,” got “into the Jet Stream of what Bill was praying for....” And what did the “Jet Stream” of the Lord reveal to Dr. Bright?

Well, I’m personally still a bit unclear what the Jet Stream did say, at least initially. Of greater importance is what the God of the Burning Bush, who terrorized Moses, Isaiah, and Luther with His holiness, whose Word leveled Saul of Tarsus to the ground, whose law demands perfect obedience to all His commandments, did *not* say to Bill Bright. The Jet Stream did not speak to Bill Bright about his sin. Didn’t need to. As Bright put it in the “Bright Side,” “Since I learned how to breathe spiritually many years ago, I frankly do not have that much to confess.”²

Let me see if I’ve understood correctly. After enough years of “spiritual breathing” your sins decrease. One enters an experience where sins of heart, word and deed (of both commission and omission) are *numerically* reduced.

Bill Bright’s approach to the Christian life appears to be, strangely enough, classically medieval. Only certain terms are altered; the content remains thoroughly Roman. The “ladders of ascent” (prayer, fasting, penance, etc.) developed by the monastic orders in great detail during the Middle Ages (and which were well known and practiced aggressively by the young Luther) now reappear in our day under different phrases like “spiritual breathing.”

Luther, however, provided an entirely different answer to

questions of sin:

Thou, my Lord Jesus, art my Righteousness; I am Thy sin. Thou has taken from me what is mine and hast given me what is Thine. Thou has become what Thou wert not and madest me to be what I was not. *Beware of your ceaseless striving after a righteousness so great that you no longer appear as a sinner in your own eyes, and do not want to be a sinner. For Christ dwells only in sinners.* See C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law & Gospel*, trans. W.H.T. Dau, p. 110 (St. Louis, 1929).

Bill Bright and other victorious life teachers of the past century say that over the course of your life you should succeed in slaying more and more sins through “spiritual breathing” and other such ladders. Luther, on the other hand, came to actually welcome his sins, in one sense, allowing them to drive him *daily* to Christ, the “only ladder to God.” (See Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, St. Louis ed., XX, esp. p. 199 ff.) The Christian life, wrote Luther, is a life of continual repentance. Luther’s search ended with finding a Christ ready to save even the sinning Christian. Luther discovered that *Christ had no interest in, and offers nothing to, righteous people.* It is not surprising then that the old Lutheran service of the Divine Word requires the confession of sin in the first sentence of public worship in the service. Well, second sentence really. “Amen” is the first sentence.

Victorious life teaching leads in one direction: Christ’s work on the Cross diminishes in significance while the sinner increases. Why must this be? Because as one focuses on “sinning less,” the focus on Christ’s atoning work is less. Fewer sins, less need for forgiveness, less interest in a Gospel of “foreign” righteousness (Formula of Concord (F. C.), Solid Decl., VI, 2-8; Apology of the *Augsburg Confession* (Ap.), III, 39 ff.).³

The charge is still made, however, that at least advocacy of

a victorious Christian life is proactive. Luther's doctrine of Justification, it is argued, so focuses the Christian on sin, Repentance, and the Cross that it does not offer a serious theology of the Christian life. This argument was put to Luther and other sixteenth-century Lutheran confessors early in the course of the Reformation. Their response came initially in the form of the *Augsburg Confession* of 1530.

Let's look at the answers offered by victorious life teachers (represented by "Arrowhead") as opposed to those answers found in the Lutheran confessions (represented by "Augsburg").

Arrowhead vs. Augsburg on Sin

Victorious life teaching and the Reformation have radically different views of what sin is, what it has done, and what it continues to do.

The Reformers believed they were reclaiming the biblical doctrine of sin when they argued that the "nature of men is born corrupt and full of faults" (Ap., II, 6). There is no fear of God or faith resident in man in his natural state in Adam.

Nothing in man, therefore, warrants Redemption. It all warrants damnation. Any theology, therefore, which throws one back on himself in any way (e.g., giving my "utmost for His highest"), including techniques such as "spiritual breathing" and fasting, always evidences a defective theology of sin and always effaces Christ's finished work as the only true ladder down from heaven.

Continuous prattle concerning the "new life" by victorious life teachers covers up the essential fact that they do not understand sin. Instead, they teach techniques for constructing ladders of ascent in the war against the Devil, the flesh and the world. The "Spirit-filled" life ends up meaning "Jesus is very important for Salvation and very helpful in Sanctification and that's great, but the choices made by the 'new reborn me' are the keys to my own final status in the kingdom, and that is

a lot more interesting."

Luther would have none of this, once remarking that "Man, at his most righteous moment, sins." In fact, the Lutheran Confessions teach that in Adam we never cease sinning. Adam is professional at sinning and will not cease to do so till death. Adam cannot be improved (Ap. II, 3, 8, 25, 26). We are turned by nature both from God (*aversus a Deo*) and *against* God (*adversus Deum*) (Ap., II, 1).

Philip Melancthon, Luther's trusted aide, explores the biblical view of sin further in Article II of the *Apology* of the *Augsburg Confession* where he says that Christ removes the *guilt* of original and actual sin, although the inclination to do evil (often referred to as "concupiscence") remain from Adam. In fact, we still actively pursue sin. That is concupiscence (Ap., II, 3, 8, 25, 26). Even the Christian continues to hunt sin down like a prostitute, embrace it, and lie with it. Sin continues to exist and to rear its distorted profile in Old Adam. Sin, therefore, continues to exist, but it is *not* imputed to those who are justified by grace through faith in Christ (Ap., II, 36). To seek to "decrease" the volume of sins is to ignore the fact that we are sinners by nature in Adam. The Cross, however, declares the ungodly justified and liberates the Christian for the first time to war against sin (Rom. 7).

Bill Bright quickly follows up his theologically remarkable statement about having fewer sins to confess by engaging in this equally remarkable dialogue: "Have I arrived at spiritual perfection? Far from it." However, as physicist Wolfgang Pauli stated when reviewing a student's paper: "This isn't right. It isn't even wrong." Some questions are simply worthless because they are not in the ball park where the game is being played. Unfortunately for Bill Bright, the Bible has utterly no interest in the topic of "spiritual perfection" in the sense intended by the victorious life teachers of moralism. The Bible does have a lot to say, however, about God's *demand* of *absolute* perfection in order to be allowed into His presence

without being fried.

Luther, in contradistinction to preaching a moralistic “spiritual perfectionism,” advised Reformation pastors that it was a sign of the new birth in Christ when a soul was terrorized by his sins and experiencing warfare with the flesh. A low interest in sin leads to a high interest in moralistic “spiritual perfection.”

American evangelicals generally drink deep from the cup of the fifth-century British monk, Pelagius. Both the *Augsburg Confession* and *Apology* explicitly condemned Pelagius and his teachings (that is, the teaching that we are not born in sin and are free to choose God and free to live lives of obedience to God) and also “semi-Pelagianism” (which teaches that while we are born in sin, we still have freedom to choose God) (A.C., II; Ap., II, 3, 8, 25, 26; IV, 19, 29). Evangelical semi-Pelagianism teaches a cooperation with God in both Justification and Sanctification. In the medieval Roman system, such cooperation occurs through participation in the sacramental system. In evangelical “victorious life” circles, cooperation comes through both the call to walk the aisle (to show your commitment to Justification) as well as the call to do “spiritual breathing” (to show your commitment to Sanctification).

Arrowhead vs. Augsburg on Justification and Sanctification

Luther called Justification the doctrine on which the church rises or falls (*articulus stantis ex cadentis ecclesiae*). Misunderstand this doctrine, or worse, confuse it with Sanctification, and the gates of hell advance. The *Augsburg Confession*, Article IV, states what Justification is:

Men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight.

Roman Catholic theology holds, however, that while Adam's fall into sin corrupted human nature and that human nature was therefore completely depraved, sinners (following their conversion and infused with renewing grace by means of baptism) obtain Sanctification and ultimately Justification through the sacramental system. While true Christians do continue to commit some sins, they should also begin to do more and more good works and fewer and fewer bad works. Sanctification properly carried out through participation in the sacramental system ultimately justifies.

Of course, Sanctification in such a system quickly swallows up Justification. The new life in Christ under this system necessarily involves the conscious and progressive eradication of known sins. The objectivity found in the means of grace is replaced with a “zeal meter” which measures spiritual maturity. Such a view of Sanctification, however, ignores the fact that even Sanctification is fundamentally objective—it is *sola Christus*, by Christ alone. Christ *alone* is our Redemption and our Sanctification (1 Cor. 1:30).

The *Augsburg Confession* points out that Justification is a forensic (or legal) and declaratory act whereby our sins are no longer counted against us, and Christ's perfect alien righteousness is imputed to the ungodly and wicked sinner qua sinner. Sanctification, or the Christian life, then follows Justification and will flow out of a heart of gratitude (Ap., II, 15-22; III, 2-4, 9, 10, 15-23, 98, 168). Sanctification is a gift of God, just as Justification is a gift. It is gross confusion to teach that God is the active agent in Justification, but that man (even “born again” man) is the active agent in Sanctification. Both Justification and growth in faith (i.e., Sanctification) are affected by the objective means of grace. As the *Augsburg Confession* puts it, it is “through instruments (i.e., the “means of grace”—Word and Sacraments) that the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith, where and when it pleases God” (A.C., V).

God, therefore, builds faith and does the sanctifying, and

He does it through the means of grace—Word, water, bread and wine. Adam contributes resistance and sin to both Justification and Sanctification. Both Repentance and obedience are, from start to finish, gifts of God: The Christian life begins and is sustained as a free gift of grace.

Sanctification (or the “Spirit-filled life”) is not a process whereby the sinner peers into his spiritual navel and concludes that he is “improving” since he is committing fewer sins and feels more zealous for God. Such an approach always leads to hypocrisy (“I am better than Christian Slob ‘X’”) or despair (“Oh no, look at glowing Christian ‘Y’ and her obedient life”). Sanctification is recognizing sin daily in your own life and letting it drive you to Christ rather than to spiritual aerobics. A victorious Christian life which does not take one back to the Cross in regular repentance is not a Christian life at all. It is deceit at the most insidious level (1 John 1:8). It is only when our sins confront us regularly through the law that they force us to the Cross where God declares us forgiven for Christ’s sake and imputes His Son’s alien righteousness to us based on Christ’s merit.

The decreasing interest of victorious life teachers in God’s law and on their own sins and an increasing interest in moralism and on others’ sins (those of Hollywood, the ACLU, President Clinton, the Supreme Court, etc.) raise a third point clarified in the Lutheran Confessions.

Arrowhead vs. Augsburg on the Law and Confession of Sins

Ignorance of the Law and the requirements of God deceive one into thinking that his sins are decreasing in volume.

Bill Bright and other victorious life teachers apparently believe that they do have or should have fewer sins now than they did last year. This speaks to us because as Americans we believe in the concepts of progress and improvement and can easily apply them to the new life in Christ. Most evangelicals, therefore, would be repulsed with Luther’s admonition to

“seek to be sinners.”

This approach, however, misunderstands the role of the law in the Christian life in three critical ways. First, an emphasis on a victorious life will *never* take the Law of God seriously. It can’t. Why? Because the Law will always point out sin and will *always* condemn you as unrighteous at any level you choose to seriously examine—*Lex Semper Accusat* (“the law always accuses”) (Ap., III, 128, 174). The law constantly accuses and shows us God’s wrath. Its purpose is to drive us to total despair (Ap., III, 91; IV, 20). As Luther’s *Small Catechism* recites:

Question: Do you believe that you are a sinner?

Answer: Yes, I believe it; I am a sinner.

Question: How do you know this?

Answer: From the Ten Commandments; these I have not kept.

Second, an emphasis on “fewer sins” and the victorious life forgets that God’s standard is absolute perfection, not “improvement” or “getting better” or “feeling more love for God” than last week. Worse yet, it is perfection all the way to the level of motives. As the confession of sin recites at the beginning of the Divine Service: “I have sinned in thought, word and deed in what I have done and in what I have left undone.”

Third, the emphasis on “fewer sins” in the victorious life obliterates the fact that Regeneration and renewal are “but only begun” in this life and that we are indeed in a “constant struggle against the flesh, that is, against the corrupt nature and disposition which cleaves to us unto death” (F. C., Epitome (Ep.), VI, 3). The Old Adam “still inheres in the understanding, the will, and all the powers of man,” and thus it is needful that “the law of the Lord be presented so that one does not institute a human standard of holiness born out of human devotion” (F. C., Ep., VI, 3).

Is Bill Bright's theology of confession biblical? The *Augsburg Confession* states that it is not even possible to enumerate all sins. Why? Because as stated in Psalm 19:12: "Who can understand his errors?" (A. C., XI). Old Adam always whispers: "God only requires that you do your best," and "it is only *known* sins which separate you from God."

Without a knowledge of the law, one ends up where most American evangelicals reside today—with great interest in the pivotal questions of our day such as whether alcohol can be legitimately consumed or tobacco used. Indeed it is a flawed doctrine of sin and confession that fuels the "reclaiming Christian America" movement.

Arrowhead vs. Augsburg on Monastic Vows

Bill Bright's publicized forty-day fast is the type of medieval monastic ritual placarded by "higher life" monks in the sixteenth century. Instead of emphasizing the chief doctrines of Law and Gospel, sin and grace, forensic Justification, the centrality of the Cross, the imputed foreign righteousness of Christ, and Sanctification as a free gift, the monastic vow of fasting to demonstrate one's obedience and zeal rises like Frankenstein from the grave. The result is that spiritual elitism creeps in. Why?

Elitism results when the idea is communicated that human denial displays a higher level of spirituality and can pry special favors from God. Not all can fast, especially like Jesus and Moses. Pretty elite group. Therefore, not all get the Jet Stream. But how much denial is enough to get into the Jet Stream? Forty days without food? What about forty-one? Old Adam is drawn to this approach to righteousness. We respond to this ladder of ascent since it encourages us to "give something up for God," thus levering God to act for us. It also allows us to grade spiritual commitment so that we can determine who is really "sold out" for the Lord. But as Luther reminds us, God will not act at *our* bidding.

It was not unexpected that Bill Bright would have a direct word from God at the end of his forty-day vow. The ladder was set. God really had no choice but to speak directly (i.e., without means) to him after that much human denial. Fasting had done its work. The tube was now shoved down God's craw. Here is how Bill Bright put it in the "Bright Side" after the vigil:

Dr. Bright: (crying) This morning I was awakened early. The Lord impressed upon me what he had been saying to me for a couple of weeks. I have had the assurance that the things I have been praying for would be fulfilled: There will be an awakening in America; He will enable us to be a part of completing the fulfillment of the great commission; our World Center will be erected; we will see the International Christian Leadership University established; we will see a radio and television program developed, where Vonette and I will take the basic truths and messages of Campus Crusade to thousands. Now I'm not given to prophecy, I'm a Presbyterian. We don't do things like that. But I am telling you what God told me and I'm willing to stake my life on it.

Bill Bright and his followers have equated their forty-day fast with that of Moses and our Lord. This is telling. Moses finished his forty days by returning with the Word written on stone. Bill Bright returned with words to be written for television. Not Scripture, mind you, but a "word from God" that Bill Bright "stakes his life on."

Confused? I think it means something like this: God speaks directly to certain Christians now under certain conditions and after you have showed Him sufficient denial, but doesn't bother to have it written down as Scripture any longer. Too much bother, apparently, and think how big the Bible would be! In any event, an eleventh commandment was apparently given to Bill and Vonette Bright, and the rough translation from the Greek is as follows: "Thou shalt build a university. Real fast, too. And even better, thou shalt be on worldwide

radio and television with thy wife.”

It is important to remember that Luther actually did “spiritual breathing” in the monastery. But Luther took Bill Bright’s path to “spiritual perfection” to its logical and dead end, complete with hair shirts, flagellation, and continuous marches to the confessional box. Luther knew, however, God’s true law and knew that *perfect* obedience was the standard and not just trying to do your best or improving or being zealous. The result for Luther was constructive insanity.

The *Augsburg Confession* (Article XVI) discusses the numerous monastic traditions and “levers” attempted by the medieval church to get God to send his “Jet Stream” their way in the sixteenth century. Formulas for a victorious life developed directly from such traditions in the Middle Ages. For example, really spiritual monks who denied themselves worldly pleasures offered special prayer requests (often for a fee) because they were in the heavenly “Jet Stream,” whereas the rest of the Christian masses had access to God only through the common earthly means of ink, paper, water, bread and wine. These traditions, says the *Apology to the Augsburg Confession*, obscure the holy commandments of God and become synonymous with a victorious Christian life (Ap., XX, VII, 34).

No amount of human denial merits grace. Human denial, like all human effort directed toward establishing a holiness *extra Christus*, merits damnation. Human denial actually brought total terror to Luther as he realized how little he really ever gave up for God. The *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, however, assures us: “We ought to trust that we have been absolved, not because of our contrition, but because of Christ’s Word” (Ap., III).

Conclusion

Luther said the Christian life is one of continual repentance, and that every Christian is no more than one day old. Adam still rears his head, the flesh is still at war. One day we will enter

into a final rest with our Lord Christ in whom is true Redemption and Sanctification, the forgiveness of our daily trespasses.

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Endnotes

- 1 Since this article was originally written Dr. Bright’s forty-day fast (which began, interestingly, on the day after Independence Day, July 5, 1994) has taken on further ramifications. A gathering of some six hundred leaders, representing more than a hundred denominations, took place in Orlando, Florida, December 5-7, 1994. Dr. Bright called this gathering, “as close to a world changing event as anything most of us have ever experienced.” Out of that meeting “Pray & Fast ’95” was convened in Los Angeles in November 1995, with a huge promotional effort to get the word out for millions to join Dr. Bright in his fast for the revival of America. The book, *The Coming Revival: America’s Call to Fast, Pray, and “Seek God’s Face”* (New Life Publications: Orlando, 1995) was published to tell the whole story of God’s revelation to Bill Bright. The dedication page says, “To all believers who will join with me in fasting and praying for revival in North America and the fulfillment of the Great Commission around the world—especially to

the two million for whom God has impressed me to pray who will fast forty days.”

- 2 In the book, *The Coming Revival* (New Life: Orlando, 1995), p. 28, Bright writes of fasting as a means to deeper spiritual power and Sanctification:

... I want to be cautious that I am not misunderstood. Fasting does not make one a member of the spiritual elite. One does not have to fast to be used of God. Everyone who joined us at the fasting and prayer gathering has had successful ministries. But there is no doubt in my mind—gained from Scripture, history, and experience—that those who fast with pure motives will be drawn closer to the great heart of God and experience a quality of life in the Spirit that is not possible apart from fasting.

One can hardly avoid the notion of a “spiritual elite” in the light of such an observation. If I can “with pure motives” be “drawn closer to the great heart of God and experience a quality of life in the Spirit that is not possible apart from fasting,” does this create another plane of life known only to those who truly fast, and that with “pure motives”?

- 3 The *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, done in 1531, is a lengthy explanation of each article of the Confession. Both the *Augsburg Confession* and the *Apology* are part of the *Book of Concord*, which is the compilation of the confessional writings of the Lutheran Church compiled from 1530 to 1580 (ed. Tappert, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959).
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