

## Primitive Baptist Universalism

During a recent visit to Berea, Kentucky I picked up an interesting book, "In the Hands of a Happy God" by Howard Dorgan (The University of Tennessee Press, 1997). Dorgan has written a few other books, specializing in various Christian sects in Appalachia.

This book introduced me to a strain of the Baptist faith I did not know existed ... the "Primitive Baptist Universalists." Dorgan talks about the history of many different Baptist subdenominations in Appalachia, loosely referred to as "Old-Time Baptists." The Primitive Baptists are one faction descending from the overall "Old-Time Baptists," and a division took place within the Primitive Baptists over the issue of hell, thereby forming the "Primitive Baptist Universalists" (PBU).

Dorgan describes a number of PBU churches in Virginia, West Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky and Ohio. Referred to within Appalachia as "No Hellers," Dorgan reports that in 1995 there were 571 official PBU members.

PBU's believe that hell does exist, but as a temporal-world condition rather than an afterlife place. They believe one's punishment for sin takes place in this present life, and that one will follow God because it is joyous to do so, not because of a fear of an eternal punishment in the afterlife.

PBU's are not biblical literalists. They believe that much of Scripture speaks in parables, or is subject to interpretations tied to historical settings.

Most of PBU theology has been passed down through oral tradition, but Charles Nickels was one who has passed down some written work. Nickels wrote:

"In my survey and meditation on the theory of hellfire and damnation, or a living, conscious, Eternal punishment after death, for any of the creatures of His Powerful Hand, I find that it is not compatible with the Holy Nature of the High and Lofty One that inhabiteth Eternity. And if true, would bar, and exclude Him from the Divine Attributes of Love, Justice, and Mercy ... We cannot conceive of Him violating all the Holy faculties of His Person, by consigning any part of His helpless creation to interminable torture. It would rob Him of Justice, since man was created without choice, or will in the matter, and violated the Divine Law by reason of the evil propensities of the nature given him." (Dorgan, page 88)

Nickels further wrote that universal atonement "is not a licentious doctrine, for God punishes the transgressor. For truly the way of the transgressor is hard." (Dorgan, page 90) As for Christ's

atonement, Nickels writes:

“Christ’s atonement was for all humankind and at Resurrection will irrevocably come to pass for all humankind; just as, irrevocably, Adam’s transgression earlier had condemned all to the sinful state of natural man.” (Dorgan, page 91)

Concerning the church, Nickels writes:

“There is an ‘elect,’ Christ’s church which has been ‘separated from the rest of God’s people here in time,’ chosen to be a witness for Christ and an earthly preserver of his righteousness, and ‘kept by the power of God through faith,’ never finally to fall away.” (Dorgan, page 92)

PBU’s believe that at the resurrection, all sin will end, the judgment (or sentence upon humans) will end, punishment (the hell on earth) will end, and death (the ultimate punishment for Adamic sin) will end. All are then saved through the work of Christ.

Dorgan indicates that the PBU movement has its roots in the teachings of Hosea Ballou (1771-1852), an early 19<sup>th</sup> century Baptist turned Universalist. The theology of Elhanan Winchester (1751-1797) is also described as having a strong influence on the present-day PBU’s.

The PBU worship style and church polity remains true to the Primitive Baptist tradition, but they separated from other Primitive Baptists when persecuted over the issue of universalism.

Having been a part of the Methodist tradition most of my life, I was surprised to find there were Christians who believed that God will eventually save all of mankind, while believing at the same time that the Bible is the Word of God. I was never exposed to teachings outside of the “mainline” Christian movement. Now, in reading Dorgan’s book, I find that there are even more Christian offshoots that have come to understand the wonderful plan of God to save all mankind. The PBU’s are not large in number, but they are yet another witness within the Body of Christ of the full evangel (gospel), that God will one day save all.

- Bob Evely -