

Council On Revival and Moral Government Theology

By Dean Harvey

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

This issue focuses on recent news important to most of us who read this newsletter. I consider that the chronology of these events is important enough to warrant almost an entire issue. I want all of you to understand the issues, to know what is going on behind the scenes, outside of the limelight, but which may have great implications for us. We have nothing to fear from truth, from an open, honest, unbiased discussion of the issues. As you read the chronology of events, consider these two things. (1) We are committed: to free will and responsibility (not to autonomy as we are so often falsely accused), to a theology which explains the Bible in a way which makes sense, to the sovereignty of God¹, to a theology which holds God blameless for all the sin and suffering in the universe, and which allows for things to happen outside of God's will. Is it possible that we are making such inroads that they are afraid of us? (2) I have before me two articles from Christianity Today, April 21, 1989, and March 5, 1990, both of which call into question much of the agenda of COR, and place it in the "Reconstructionist" or "Theonomic" camp. Since Dr. Grimstead told me that most of their people are "Reformed" and "cessationist" in theology, I question how much of the Body of Christ they represent. Certainly not as much as they believe they represent, or hope to represent.

Thank you for your continued support of EEM. If we are ever to make this newsletter into a major theological journal, we must have a growing base of prayer, financial supporters, and writers, Please join our team.

Thank you for your prayers for my wife. We are encouraged as the Lord answers prayer after prayer.

SUMMARY OF EVENTS WITH COR IN THE RECENT PAST

I deem it necessary to inform those of you who would identify yourselves within the "Moral Government" camp of some events which have happened since January, 1993, I have tried to relate these events in a chronological order.

In January '93 I received a phone call from Dr. Jay Grimstead, the President of the Coalition on Revival (COR). I had talked with Jay on at least two previous occasions, and so we at least had a "telephone acquaintance". Jay asked me to come to San Bernardino on February 13 to represent "Moral Government," and specifically to defend what he termed (1) the "limited omniscience" of God,² (2) the governmental theory of the

atonement, and (3) "the whole Pelagian thing," by which he meant that we do not believe in the doctrine of a sinful nature received in some way from Adam. He said that I could bring one or two others with me, and that he would try to make sure that we would be treated in a spirit of Christian love.

We had a pleasant conversation for about an hour. It is appropriate here to note that COR has begun a theological journal, *Crosswinds*, which is comprehensive in scope, and I do need to say that it has contained some excellent articles in the first two issues. COR has also done excellent work in issuing the Chicago Statement on Inerrancy, and the Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics, both of which I subscribe to without reservation.

In our telephone conversation, Jay explained what COR was trying to do. I will try to summarize as briefly as possible. COR will sponsor a "preliminary dialogue"³ in February 1993, a North American Protestant Church Council in Washington, D. C., in July 1994, a Western Hemisphere Church Council in July, 1995, and a World Church Council in July, 1996. Jay explained to me that as Church Councils have met at various times in church history to clarify the position of the church on various points of doctrine, it is now time "to discuss, clarify and, it is hoped, arrive at a broad consensus within the Body of Christ on a number of important issues which now divide the Church unnecessarily. It is our hope that the delegates from all the various denominations, schools, churches and organizations will come to a clear consensus and make a united, public statement of agreement on a majority of the 24 issues under examination."⁴

However, I expressed my doubts about such a venture, since it seemed to me that COR has already made up its mind about these issues. Let me explain why. In 1990 COR wrote a letter to four men who purportedly spoke for moral government, and that letter included the following statement,

"Before we issue a public statement about the heretical nature of some of the teachings of MGT (Moral Government Theology) we want to give you men an opportunity to show our theologians why biblically and logically these points they think are heresy are in fact not heresy and therefore not dangerous to the soul and ministry of other Christians."⁵

That letter included as an enclosure a paper written by E. Calvin Beisner, titled *The Heresy of Moral Government Theology*, which includes the following statement in the Preamble, p. 3,

"In our conclusion we will call for All (sic) Christians to denounce Moral Government Theology as heresy and for those who have embraced it in the past to renounce it publicly and embrace biblical orthodoxy in its stead."

The statement in the conclusion of Mr. Beisner's paper, pp. 33-34 follows.

"We therefore call upon all who call themselves Christians to condemn Moral Government Theology. Not only should it not be embraced among the people of God, but also it should be rejected and fought by them. It is not one among many slight variations on the gospel; it is anti-gospel. It is not one among many varieties of Christianity, it is anti-Christianity. Therefore, all institutions within the Church of God are duty bound to prohibit the teaching and propagating of Moral Government Theology by refusing to permit anyone to teach it under their auspices. Furthermore, any institution that heretofore has permitted the teaching of Moral Government Theology ought, from fidelity to Christ and His Word and from a care for the health of the Body of Christ, to repent publicly of it and to do all in its power to restore those previously influenced by Moral Government theology under their auspices to a biblical understanding of the glorious perfections of God, the sinfulness of man, the atoning work of Christ, and justification by grace through faith."

Additionally, of the 24 issues to be debated at the Church Councils in 1994-1996, these are included,

4. Pelagianism as Heretical - Dr. Henry Krabbendam

5. Substitutionary Atonement and Forensic Justification as Non-optional

6. Omniscience of God as Non-Optional; Process Theology as Heretical - Mr. E. Calvin Beisner⁶

I explained to Jay that I would not appear before a council in the same manner in which the Arminians did in 1618 at the Synod of Dort. They appeared under duress, they were not parties to the discussion, and the result of the synod was a foregone conclusion. (I will still summarize that synod in a future issue, I promise.[ed. note: see the article [The Synod of Dort and Moral Government Theology](#) for this summary]) Would it do any good to go and try to argue my (our) case? Does it sound to you like there is any chance of getting a fair hearing? Or that they are open, and trying to reach a consensus?

But I really wanted to go. I want to tell the truth about God, as I understand it. It has changed my life and ministry, and I have seen much more good fruit, as a percentage, within this part of the Body of Christ than in any other part. I do not fear standing for truth as I see it. So I contacted several men whom I trust, not only because of their knowledge, but also because of their Christlike characters. They were divided on the issue of whether or not we should go, but we finally arrived at a contingent of three men, and continued to pray and discuss the issue. Jay called me a second time, and we had a pleasant conversation. This conversation reaffirmed my impression that Jay really loves the Lord, and believes in what he and COR are doing.

During the prayer and preparation time, two questions came up for which we needed answers. (1) If we go and debate the three issues (Before Feb. 13, COR notified us that "Item 4-Pelagianism as Heretical," was dropped from the "preliminary dialogue.") with

the COR representatives, who will decide who won the debate? In my second phone call with Jay, he said that twenty of the forty members of the COR Church Council Executive Committee would be the audience for the debate. And obviously they would write the conclusion. From what I have quoted above, does it sound like we would have even a remote possibility of an objective hearing? (2) How is COR going to reach a consensus within the Body of Christ? To help me answer this question, I called Ron Boehme, a friend for 15 years who is really committed to revival, and who had been a member of the COR Steering Committee until 1990, for his advice. I had three phone conversations with him over a period of about two weeks. Here is a brief summary of the salient points of our conversations as I remember them.

Ron first said that he didn't think I should go, because the COR people were not open, their minds were made up. He said that if I did go, that it would have to be for my own benefit, to help me clarify my positions. He gave some examples of struggles he had had in the past with some members of COR, notably Mr. Beisner, over the Moral Government issue. He noted that no matter what I said, they would write the conclusion of the debate, and that there was no way that any consensus would result, but that their position would be stated, and our position would be denigrated.

Later, as I thought about it, I came to the conclusion that the consensus which COR seeks is not something which is yet to be achieved, but they intend to make their present doctrinal position the consensus. I believe that they are going through the motions of appearing to reach a consensus, maybe honestly, so that on the other end they can present their own position and declare it to be the consensus, reached by dialogue with the entire Body of Christ. I think that they could do this honestly because they so strongly believe that they hold the theological high ground. With this conclusion, we decided not to go to San Bernardino for the "preliminary dialogue." If we went, we would help to give them credibility, in the sense that they could say later, "Well, the moral government people did come to try to get our approval, and we found them to be heretics."

A few days later, I received the following letter.

C.O.R.
89 Pioneer Way
Mountain View, CA 94041
January 28, 1993

TO: Richard Bender
Harry Conn
Howard Roy Elseth
Ben Gilmore
Dean Harvey
George Otis Jr.
Winkie Pratney

Dear Gentlemen,

This letter comes to formally invite you brothers to come meet with our theologians over the next three years and enter into dialogue and debate with us to defend your belief that Moral Government Theology is not heretical and unbiblical. All the theologians from many denominations with whom we have discussed this the past five years seem to be in unanimous agreement that the theology taught by Gordon Olson, called Moral Government Theology, is very unbiblical, very dangerous for the Church at large and has to be labeled as heresy by all who stand with mainstream, historic Christianity of the past 2000 years.

This is a heavy matter and is difficult and uncomfortable at best. Five of you brothers listed above I have come to love and respect as dear Christian soldiers who serve Christ earnestly with all your heart. And I have a special love and respect for Ron Boehme as a co-worker and as a son, who had to sever formal connections with C.O.R. over this matter. Ron and I have both wept and been in pain over all this so it is not just an academic matter to me, nor do I enjoy clarifying what is and is not heresy or telling friends they appear to be into serious, harmful christian heresy. I tell you this so you will know I will do my best to see that we deal with all of you in the most gentle way possible in a Christlike spirit, realizing you all believe you see the true biblical perspective on these points.

The three major items of concern to our committee are what we claim that mainstream Christianity has already condemned as heresy hundreds of years ago. These heresies are:

1. Olson's claim that God does not have absolute omniscience and total foreknowledge and claiming that God can only know what Olson claims is possible to know in advance;
2. Olson's claim that forensic justification and the substitutionary atonement wherein God's wrath against sinners is appeased and our sin debt paid by Christ is not the true biblical interpretation of Christ's death;
3. Olson's apparent teaching of semi-Pelegianism wherein he denies the doctrine of Original Sin.

We are endeavoring to deal with these three doctrinal matters within the context of a large Church Council wherein we are discussing 24 different theological points which now divide the Church. I enclose an article explaining the outline, purpose and procedure of that North American Church Council. The 24 topics are listed there as well as the 40 members of the Church Council Committee and an alternate committee called the Charismatic Council on Theology. The three Moral Government Theology issues are listed as topics #4, 5 and 6 on p. 124 of the Church Council article. For the record, we are not attempting to deal with organizations, churches or mission agencies which now or in the past embraced these teachings we call heresy. Our hope is just to be able to deal with these three doctrines as objective issues and to invite those who oppose our calling Olson's teaching by the name of "heresy" to come and bring their best scriptural, historical and logical arguments to the discussion table and show why they think our

assessment of Moral Government Theology is wrong. I am writing to you seven men because you are the only ones on earth I know who actually teach and/or believe Moral Government Theology and defend Olson's teaching. If you know of others please invite them to come get into this debate on your side. What we know is that, this has to be dealt with in serious, theological dialogue rather than to be considered an issue either not worth debating or too dangerous to touch. We really have no other option.

I have invited my new friend, Dean Harvey, to come represent the MGT viewpoint and bring his arguments against our papers on topics #5 (Atonement) and #6 (Omniscience) which will be presented at our Preliminary Dialogue on Sat. Feb. 13th from 2:00 pm-5:00 pm at Arrowhead Springs Conference Center in San Bernadino. He was gracious enough to consent and will be there with a seminarian...to represent Moral Government Theology. On each of those topics, our Council paper will be presented for 20 min., then Dean will have 20 min. to present the MGT viewpoint, then Dean and our committee member will each have 10 min. for a short rebuttal, then there will be 30 minutes for comments and questions from the floor. I will be running this dialogue to be sure Dean and all participants are treated fairly with dignity. Men who oppose my theology will tell you that I have a track record of being able to conduct such dialogue debates fairly and even lovingly. It is true that the audience (20 members of our committee)⁷ will all be taking the Council's position. Dean will have both papers in advance of coming.

I am inviting any of you other men who can, to come join this dialogue at 2:00 on Feb. 13th. And, more importantly, I am asking you together to select among you three men who can be a MGT team (or more if you like) to write three papers defending the MGT position on these three points and meet us in Jan. 1994 in D.C. for a more complete debate, then again at our Church Council in July, 1994. We don't know of a more rational, godly way to approach this problem. Unless scriptural arguments are presented to us by the best proponents of MGT in face-to-face dialogue/debate to show that we are mistaken in our assessment of MGT, we feel we have an obligation to continue to warn the Church at large, worldwide, that MGT is a dangerous, unbiblical heresy which must be denounced by all denominations and mission agencies which care for true biblical theology.

It would be well for me to also mention these items.

First, in our examination of Charles Finney, as you may know, we have concluded that he definitely did believe and teach a heretical view of the atonement. I must say this even though Finney is one of my revival heroes whose heart I love, and most of whose teaching (98% ??) I love and teach myself. He was greatly used of God and was indeed a man of God . . . all of which leads to the next point.

Second, a man like Finney or Pelagius can be an outstanding man of God, committed to Christ, burdened for the Church to live righteous lives and do a lot of good for the Church and the world and still be caught up in and teach a terrible, destructive, unbiblical heresy. Thus, pure heartedness and holiness is no guarantee whatsoever that what a teacher teaches is biblical or is not very dangerous for the Church. From what I hear of Gordon

Olson, he was a marvelous, loving, Christlike man, but, our opinion is, it did not help him to stay out of terrible heresy...heresy which must be denounced and exposed if it is indeed heresy.

Third our council members all are aware that we cannot expect all portions of the Church on earth to completely agree with all other portions of the church, nor are we expecting that. But, we do believe firmly, as has the vast mainstream of the Church for 2000 years, that there is a definite, large body of truth, theology, doctrinal points which we must expect all clear-thinking adult members of the Body of Christ to believe and stand upon. We believe that the 42 Articles of C.O.R. is a very good, comprehensive statement of those basic doctrines which the Church worldwide has believed and defended and required of its members since the first century. We have received nothing but enthusiastic responses from every denomination and institution whose theologians have examined those 42 Articles. If there is anything in these 42 Articles which you think is unbiblical (except the three MGT points listed here) I would like to hear from you.⁸ AS YOU Can See, we created these articles so they would stay away from denominational distinctives such as baptism, eschatology or church government. We mention these 42 Articles because we have run into a concept which we think is false and unrealistic which claims that it is impossible and unwise to even attempt to distill, from the Bible, a basic list of doctrines which Christians should believe if they are to think clearly about God, life and reality. We consider that position to actually be impossible to defend. We assume you don't stand there.

Fourth, I must mention that, in talking at length with Winkie and a few others, I have come to see that Winkie and others have a serious misunderstanding of how to frame this debate of MGT with those who stand against MGT. We claim that MGT is so far afield from the Bible's teaching and that of the mainstream of church history that MGT stands completely outside the boundaries of true Christian doctrine and in fact is a false religion as compared to biblical Christianity. (In the same way that liberal Christianity, denying Christ's deity or resurrection, and Mormonism are false religions rather than just a different "version" of Christianity.) The mistake we detect in Winkie (and others) is that he tries to set up the equation of this debate as simply we as "hyper-Calvinists" and "Augustinians" arguing against an Arminian or Wesleyan viewpoint represented by Winkie and others. We claim, as Beisner's paper on MGT shows,⁹ that MGT is not a version of either Arminianism or John Wesley's teaching but that both Arminius and Wesley would have soundly denounced Gordon Olson's Moral Government Theology as serious heresy. This is a serious point which we believe any large group of objective theologians from all denominations would support with us. We believe this matter must be put on the world's theological table for all to examine and on which they should comment so our position on this can either be defended or condemned as unfair and unhistorical. We believe it is simply a matter of reading history and past theology with objectivity.¹⁰ Let us bring this matter to light and see if we are mistaken in this.

Fifth, we are not claiming that, just because a majority of bishops or church leaders at some council in the past decided by consensus that Christ was fully God or that Augustine was more right than Pelagius, that decision made it so. We do not take the

Catholic position on the authority of councils. However, we do claim it is only wise and appropriate to take very seriously what was decided by council, by the vast majority of church leaders in any century, and when deciding for ourselves what scripture says about each issue, to let the decision of such councils weigh very heavily with us. Through 2000 years of the Catholic church's history we have been gaining a greater understanding of scriptural truth and have been able to build on preceding generations of scholars and leaders. We claim that what is inappropriate, arrogant and full of the spirit of historical anarchy is this widespread present attitude we see among independent groups which assume nothing of worth or weight was discussed or decided by the vast Body of Christ which existed prior to this century or this generation. We should neither worship or despise the decisions of the church councils of the past. We assume you agree. Brothers, I look forward to hearing from you and proceeding forward with this adventure. With love in our Saviour and King, Jesus.

CC. Gleason Archer
Cal Beisner
Ron Boehme
Henry Krabbendam
Robert Morey
Jay Grimstead Council Coordinator"

I was amazed when I received this letter, because it had a completely different tone than I had perceived in my phone discussions with Jay. I sent him the following answer:

February 8, 1993

Dear Jay,

This letter is to inform you that I will not be at San Bernadino on February 13. I had never promised you that I would, just that I would pray about it and seek counsel. I had already decided not to attend, and assumed that you would know of my decision since I had not contacted you.

Had I decided to come to your Preliminary Dialogue, when I received your letter of January 28, 1993, I would have changed my mind, because of the tenor of your letter.

I will reply to your letter at a later date.

I would recommend that you consider Acts 5:33-39 in your pursuit of this matter, and that you also consider that every revival that I am aware of has happened in spite of, and in opposition to, the prevailing "orthodoxy" of the time. Perhaps you will be interested in an article I wrote on "orthodoxy" two years ago.

I am also enclosing a copy of Gordon Olson's research on the subject of foreknowledge.

I too am for revival,

Dean H. Harvey

Jay had sent me two papers on the atonement, one by Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen entitled *The Judicial and Substitutionary Nature of Salvation*. It was very scholarly, and if you agreed with his presuppositions, he made a very good case for the Satisfaction Theory of the atonement. The other paper was by Dr. Robert Morey entitled *Original Sin, The Atonement. And Justification*. Dr. Morey was to handle the atonement debate for COR on February 13 because Dr. Bahnsen could not attend. I frankly thought that Dr. Morey's paper was as bad as anything I had ever read on the subject. The last paragraph of his paper follows:

In short, the decisions and actions of Adam and Christ are so intertwined in Scripture that they cannot be separated. To deny the one is to deny the other. Thus any denial of the doctrines of original sin, substitutionary atonement and forensic justification must be deemed as serious heresy and as sufficient grounds for excommunication.

Dear friends, is there any reason to enter into a debate with this man when he, through COR, already holds the outcome in his hands? Dr. Morey has also written a book, *Battle of the Gods*, which equates moral government with process theology, and calls part of what we believe, "finite godism." Dr. Morey was also interviewed on the Marlin Maddox radio program, "Point of View," on April 17, 1989. The following material was transcribed from an audio tape of part of that interview. Read carefully.

Morey describes a finite god as "a god who can fail, who can lie, who can cheat." Those who believe in a god like this believe that "reality is based on pure chance, contingency." They have a god who is "this sort of fumbling, bumbling deity who blew it, an impotent, ignorant god."

Marlin asked Morey to summarize what is in his book, *Battle of the Gods*. He answered, "This is the first detailed defense and exposition of the nature and attributes of God since Stephen Charnock 400 years ago¹¹. . . For 400 years Bible believing Christians have assumed that if you believed in the Bible you understand that the God who predicted all of the hundreds of prophecies relating to the Messiah, the God who predicted the names and the rising of kingdoms, that God knows the future. This is in our hymns. I may not know the future, but I know God does, and we understand this. But today for the first time, within the Christian church we have pastors and professors and seminary and Bible College and mission leaders telling us the historic Christian concept of God has to go. We need a new concept, we need a finite God, not an infinite one, and this book examines the history of the idea of the finite god, who taught it, where did it come from. I examine all of their arguments that they give and I show how to deal with them. Then the second half of the book is positive, where I go through the Scriptures and not merely state that God is omniscient, I prove from Scripture, for example, when John says "God knows all things."

Either He does or He doesn't. John says He does . . . One's a friend I have known for almost 25 years (and he) says, "I stand against the historic Christian concept of God, God can lie, God can sin, God can fail, God does not know the future, God is not ever perfect, He's sort of groping His way in the dark every day." Then he turns around and says he no longer believes in the inspiration of the Bible, he no longer believes in heaven and hell, he no longer believes in the necessity of the preaching of the gospel. I see that once you have faulty views of God, you lose everything else in Christianity."

I don't know who his friend was, but I am offended that this man, who is supposed to be a scholar, knows so little of the viewpoint that he tries to refute. Theologians are supposed to be men of character, men of truth, and should at least understand the ideas they set out to disprove.

Shortly after that I received the following letter from Jay:

C.O.R.
Coalition On Revival
February 13, 1993

Dean,

Sorry you couldn't make it. Sorry my letter did not set well with you. I hope Winkey or someone will come meet with our men next February 12th to try again -- or sooner when ever you can.

Lets stay in touch.

Here's Cal's paper which I just got as this conference started.

Jay Grimstead

He enclosed a paper written by E. Calvin Beisner entitled *The Omniscience of God: Biblical Doctrine and Answers to Objections*. Mr. Beisner covers the same ground concerning omniscience that he did in his previous paper *The Heresy of Moral Government Theology* but he is more comprehensive.

Shortly afterward I received from Ben Gilmore a copy of a letter he had written to Jay. Here it is.

Feb 2, 1993
Dr. Jay Grimstead
2011 Fallen Leaf Lane
Los Altos, CA 94022

My dear friend and brother in Christ--

I have in hand yours of January 20, 1993 inviting myself and others to speak in behalf of what you call Moral Government Theology, I choose NOT TO HONOR your offer to "dialogue and debate with us ..." My reasons for doing so are mistrust. I believe you and/or those with whom you are associated are so dedicated to "making your point" that you will misrepresent your reports of any such oral meeting.

To review, brother, as you and I have done several times in person and in written correspondence: When first I heard that COR was being used as a vehicle to attack what you have labeled MGT, I cautioned you that you and your efforts would be damaged and you would find yourself involved in an issue that would appear quite divisive.

You continued, by sending me a copy of Cal Beisner's paper and asking that I write my responses and open a written dialogue on the subject. I did so by return mail, pointing out that I was embarrassed by the quality of his (Cal Beisner's) scholarship and disappointed that one who claims to be a church leader would put his name to such a document (as Beisner's).

I pointed out that he opened his paper with a charge of heresy and recommended censure apparently without first offering opportunity for written response. I noted further that Mr. Beisner built his argument upon historical church creeds and not upon the Word of God. I contended that a charge so serious as heresy and public censure **MUST BE BASED DIRECTLY UPON THE WORD OF GOD.**

In my response, I pointed out the glaring lack of sound biblical argument and offered my own. I requested a response (a written dialogue). You declined that and further oral and written requests. You informed me you had distributed my response and I have no responses from any that have read it.

In our last discussion on the subject, I wanted to make clear to you why I was not free to make covenant with you, because of your steadfast refusal to produce sound scripture in support of your heresy charges. I believe you mean well. I believe you are in danger of hurting things precious to you unless you return to the Word of God in support of your actions. Truth is not subject to majority opinion. Luther attested to that! Truth is not an exclusive possession. Only the Godhead are omniscient.

Lastly, the subject letter continues to use as authority in charging heresy against men and women of God, "all the theologians from many denominations with whom we have discussed this the past five years seem to be in unanimous agreement that the theology taught by Gordon Olson, called Moral Government Theology, is very unbiblical, very dangerous for the Church at large and has to be labeled as heresy by all who stand with mainstream, historical Christianity of the past 2000 years".

It appears to me you scoop a large armful of non-authority in an effort to support your point. May I respond that I need merely to stand upon the Word of God. "Let God be true and every man a liar." If just one of those in that armful wishes to offer a reasonable,

rational Bible-based refutation of any of Olson's points, I will read it with great interest. If they make their point, I will gladly acknowledge the fact with my thanks. If they appear to have missed their point, I will be happy to continue written dialogue at their request.

Until such written dialogue is established (God gave us a written Bible), I believe your proposal is in danger of becoming a "kangaroo court" and will have nothing to with it.

I love you, bro. I look forward to the day you see my point and constructive steps take place toward our both learning God's truth. Ben

cc: Richard Bender
Dean Harvey
Harry Conn
Howard Elseth
Winkie Pratney
George Otis Jr.

BOX 905, Morgan Hill, CA 95037.

That concludes the chronology of the events of this discussion.