

The Source of the Seminar's Success

"It gave me solutions to problems which I didn't even realize I had."

"It was like seeing my whole life laid out before me."

"I only wish I could have heard this many years before."

"Next to my salvation, it was the most important week of my life."

The above was taken from Bill Gothard Seminary promotional material under the heading, "The Reasons Behind Seminar Growth".

While these quotations are indeed representative of many who attend the Basic Youth Conflicts Seminars, and do express the surface motivations, the root reasons for its phenomenal success lie deeper.

The success of the Gothard Seminars is one of the most spectacular phenomena of religious activity in recent years. Something that effects so great a response among Christian oriented people deserves attention and careful investigation. What is it that brings multitudes out, willing to pay a fee, to get in and sit for hours and days . . . often repeating the same seminars, when churches faithfully preaching the true gospel of Jesus Christ go begging for interest? How does Gothard fill vast auditoriums, while faithful, godly ministers of the grace of God preach to empty pews? We would like to believe that this is a genuine revival, that the Holy Spirit is drawing vast numbers of people to Christ, and that the Seminars are effecting a dramatic change in people, in homes, in the churches and in the communities. But such is manifestly not the case. In the 15 or so years since the Seminars appeared, spiritual decline in the churches and moral decay in the cities where they have been held has continued to increase. And it seems that about the only correlation between the proliferation of family seminars (Narramore's, LaHaye's, Dobson's and others as well as Gothard's) and the quality and stability of family life, is that the family seems to deteriorate in proportion to the increase of seminars. Things are worse now than they were 15 years ago. This alone, however, does not *discredit* the validity or effectiveness of the seminars. One could argue that they have kept things from getting even worse than they have become

Nor can the Seminar's attraction be attributed to any superior holiness, godliness, dedication, sincerity or any other spiritual quality in Mr. Gothard. I do not question these attributes in him, but maintain that the Lord has a thousand other equally gifted and worthy servants in the country who struggle for a hearing. Nor can it be attributed to any superior gift of communication. While he does quite well on that score, he ranks far from the top.

An opportunity to attend and observe was afforded me at the February 28, 1984 Minister's All Day Seminar in Kansas City. The remarks made in this paper are based upon my impressions and notes taken from that seminar. They should not be taken as a fair over-all evaluation of all the work of Gothard, since I would need to spend far more time with him to be qualified to do that. Most of what I have to say will be negative, simply because that is the way my gleanings of that day stack up against the word of God.

I think, however, that the principle purpose of this paper will be served. That is, to determine the true cause of the Seminar's popularity. In the course of that determination, the validity and truth of much the Seminar teaches will necessarily be brought into question. It is an established fact that the elements in a purportedly Christian work which most recommend themselves to the general public are the worst ones; and the things least attractive and most offensive to people are the very truths most valid, sound and redemptive. Jesus was at the height of His popularity when He was least understood, and the nearer He came to the cross, the fewer His followers became.

The one exception to this rule is historic revival. In these gracious visitations of the might power of God, men are moved upon by God's sovereign Holy Spirit to seek the Lord, and they flock to churches in hungering hordes, desperately concerned about the eternal state of their souls, desiring to hear the word of God and His terms of salvation. Revivals produce a profound change in society, greatly diminishing evil and immorality, establishing God-honoring homes, building up churches, and generally raising a community's awareness of and fear of God. We have already observed that such is not the case with the Seminars.

In absence of such Holy Spirit activity, churches generally resort to cheap, fleshy tricks, carnal enticements, worldly publicity and promotions to get a crowd.

Mr. Gothard refuses to use the media to advertise the Seminars, refuses interviews which promise publicity, rightly reasoning that it is impossible for the worldly media to give anything but a distorted representation of a spiritual activity, since they do not understand it.

Why, then, do the people come, and keep coming? The answer to that question appeared loud and clear in the first two hours of the Seminar. *Positivism!* A negative note is never sounded. Everything is on the upswing. A question is never left unanswered, a problem never left unsolved. He "proves" his assertions of unfailing success of the Seminar principles with plenty of stories illustrating what always obtains the desired, positive result. There is an abundance of interesting stories with happy endings, never a failure. There is never a disappointment, heartache or sorrow.

This postulation is boldly set forth in Gothard's comments to the testimonies stated at the opening of this article: "So many of us have learned to accept unnecessary pressures and problems as a normal way of life. . . When steps of action are clearly laid out in the Seminar, they not only bring lasting solutions to the conflicts people are facing every day, but they reveal how many unnecessary problems in the past could have been solved if these same steps had been known and followed." Suffering never continues. The Seminar effectively puts an end to all such problems. How desperately people want to believe such a thing! But it is a totally false

concept of life, even the Christian life. *"In the world ye shall have tribulation" (John 16:33). "We must through much tribulation enter the kingdom" (Acts 14:22). "We glory in tribulations" (Romans 5:3). "Love suffers" (1 Corinthians 13:4). "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (2 Timothy 3:12).* The list continues.

Mr. Gothard uses effectively the same bait as the serpent in the Garden: *"Ye shall be as gods, knowing"*. He is no devil, but what he really promises is autonomy . . . independence from God, and with that, self goodhood. Man does not need to depend desperately upon God, according to the Seminar. All he needs is to *know* the basic principles of the Seminar and he can solve all his problems by himself.

Again, this is postulated in his promotional material. "The life of each person is governed by universal, non-optional principles." I protest that the life of each person is governed by Almighty God. God has indeed given us principles by which to live. And violation of those principles always gets us into trouble. Mr. Gothard is unquestionably right in that. But adhering to these principles does not buy for us peace and prosperity. It is God Who gives those. God has not abdicated His throne and left the universe to be run by "natural laws and principles". *He* works all things after the counsel of His Own will. A farmer must certainly use good agricultural principles if he expects to make a crop. But God decides whether he will have one or not. He controls the weather, disease and insects. So it is with a spiritual harvest. We may plant and water, but God governs the increase. This is the crux of, not only Gothard's error, but most of all the quasi-Christian seminars today.

Now, Gothard says these things in the setting most attractive to fundamental Bible believers, or at least to people inclined in that direction. Again, the same tactic as the devil, this time against the Lord in the desert: *"It is written" Luke 4:10*. As the enemy of our souls made a wrong use of the scriptures, so does he. He makes the Holy Scriptures promise something they, in fact, do not. They no more guarantee the results he promises than they assure angelic deliverance for those who jump off pinnacles. No wonder people come out of the Seminars with such confidence! His many stories, which all end in the desired result when the word of God is applied, is precisely what they have been searching for all their religious lives. They think they have finally found the answer!

Interwoven in all the teachings is a constant reselling and promotion of the Seminar and its publications. Listeners are never allowed to forget that it is the Seminar that has delivered all these goodies. Conspicuously absent is an emphasis on the glory and majesty of God, what He has done, and what He can do. Men have heard enough of that. They have prayed and trusted God and it failed. It did not work. The Seminar does. We hear this sort of thing: "This publication explains how to do such and such." "This principle will tell you how to solve that problem." "This is what the Seminar did for so and so." Immediately, an exciting story is told about how "it" worked. This fosters a false "It works" idea, an illusion people desperately want to believe. To find some prominent impressive person assuring them that it does, and that it is based on the Bible, is an irresistible attraction. Thus people come away filled, not with the wonder of the glory of God, but with that of the Seminar; and they will sing its praises far and wide.

Another powerfully attractive feature subtly set forth in his illustrations is the success syndrome. "The pastor of the largest (fastest growing, most evangelistic, most prominent, etc.) church in Atlanta attends every seminar in his area, and he always tells me how much the Seminar has shaped his ministry." The point is not missed. The Seminar will make you a great pastor. It will make you a great soul-winner. It will earn for you the title of successful preacher and the admiration of great numbers of people, like this fellow. Powerful fleshy incentive!!

We, as Christians, are impressed with Mr. Gothard's humility, his warm and unassuming manner. His presentation is meek and gentle, revealing deep sensitivity to human needs. As to the substance and scope of the Seminar's teaching, however, I have never witnessed anything more arrogant and presumptuous. It claims to have the answer to everything. From any symptom, one can unfailingly determine the root problem. And for any root problem, you have a scripture principle that men can apply and effect a certain cure. All of this treasure comes from the Seminar and its publications. One wonders how the Christian church survived nineteen centuries. No one else's work is ever recommended. Nearly two thousand years of godly learned saints, from the first century martyrs through the Reformers, the Anabaptists, the Puritans, the eighteenth century revivalists, the nineteenth century missionaries . . . none of them left us anything worthy to stand on par with the Gothard Seminar. Amazing! No contemporaries are cited. Not their books, their ministries, their teachings, except in the light that they might have been aided, inspired or improved by the Seminar. An occasional quotation might also be made from noted writings to enforce Seminar teachings. They are the textbooks of life. The Bible is allotted a reference status for the scriptures set forth in the Seminar.

I would like to now point out how some of the teachings themselves make the Seminar attractive mainly because of their error.

The Seminars are psychologically, not theologically centered. They are man-centered, not God-centered. That would be bad enough, but they are defective even in the man area. It cannot be denied that Mr. Gothard has informed himself well in the psychological makeup of man. But his lack of pastoral *and* marital experience betray his ignorance of much of the varied and complicated emotional and psychological constitution of different people. One year of married life would cure him of such brash statements as, "This is how you can make your wife a radiant Christian," or "This will tell you how to make your husband become the spiritual head of the household." A sound Biblical view of anthropology will clearly reveal that man is in such a state of moral ruin and incapacity that only God can cause him to become or do anything good. God has not put it into our power to transform the lives of any other person. The Bible certainly tells husbands and wives how they ought to behave and what they ought to do, but *never* assures us that such behaviour in one will effect any change in the other. It is the Gothard Seminar that does that. The Seminar message is more attractive to proud and arrogant man than the Bible message.

The proposals for home education of children, though noble and desirous, reveal a stark ignorance of the contrasts between the world and the church. The idea that parents can have a home school ordered by "Biblical Principles under the church" and, at the same time, "State guidelines under the state school authorities is sheer nonsense. No man can serve two masters. One might as

successfully combine Humanism and Calvinism, or Jeffersonian Democracy with Hitler's Fascism. If such a coalition were possible, if the ideals and principles of the two were not so diametrically opposed, there would be no need for private schools or home schools.

It is true that we as Christians live under God and under the state at the same time, but not in the same sphere. We render the state its lawful honour, and God His. But we as Christians, and with Christian principles, do not yoke up with the state and its worldly principles to any common task. Oxen and asses do not plow in the same yoke. Again, it would be nice to believe that such an arrangement could be made, but the hard Biblical facts deny it.

Fallacious data is set forth to buttress erroneous Seminar assertions. In order to argue that all Christians should have as many children as biologically possible, Mr. Gothard lists some notably good men who were born late to large families, making the point that had the parents practiced birth control, these good men would not have been born and the world would have lost their contribution to humanity. He neglects to mention that a great many evil men also came from large Christian families and are the last among many children. The notoriously cruel and wicked Manasseh was born during the 15 "added" years to good king Hezekiah. By the same logic we could say, had Hezekiah practiced birth control, the world could have been spared the miseries inflicted by that evil man.

Gothard reasons that, since the ungodly have a habit of killing their children, prolific Christian family births is God's plan to populate the earth with a majority of good people rather than evil. This is precisely the reasoning behind Catholicism's prohibition of birth control. And it springs from a Pelagian denial of the fall of man. Good children are not born to Christians anymore than to heathen ones. All of Adam's race beget depraved men. We would like to believe that we can produce Christian children, but we cannot. Saints are born from above by the sovereign Spirit of God. That is what the Bible says. It is not in our power to generate good people. What does Jesus say to those who hope in their natural birth? "God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham." This world will never have a majority of good people. There has never been, and never will be, anything more than a remnant, and that by the election of grace (Romans 11:5), not by prolific Christian family generation.

In order to set aside the problems of overpopulation by too many children being born, Gothard attempts to prove the earth underpopulated by declaring how few people there are per square mile of earth land surface, and upon how small an area they could all stand. Those figures are meaningless. They say nothing of how much land is arable, how much it takes to feed one person, the logistics of food and fiber distribution and other considerations. Such fallacious proofs arise from either ignorance, dishonesty, or a stubborn unwillingness on his part to admit error and retreat from an untenable position.

Illustrative stories are also fallacious in that they purport to prove that the recommended principles always work. A time is never told when one was tried and failed. Yet for every success story he tells, any experienced minister of the gospel could give a dozen failure stories; and these failure stories occur under the same principle application to which the Seminar ascribes certain success. We condemn such one-sided reporting in the news media as manipulating public opinion. Is such a tactic any less deceitful and contemptible in religious life? But the public had rather hear a success story than the truth.

The Seminar's credibility among fundamental Christians is, to a great extent, due to its abundant use of scripture. A principle is rarely set forth unaccompanied by a Bible verse. But erroneous exegesis and application is made of the word of God. A book could be written on violence done to the Bible by the Seminar. I will set forth a few.

Birth control again: Scripture? "*Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth*" (Genesis 1:28). That command was given when there was only one man and one woman on earth. Surely the existence of a billion pairs now spreads that responsibility a little thinner. The command to do a job (fill the earth) envisions a time when that job will be done. He who asks to have his cup filled does not want the pouring to continue when the cup runs over.

Addressing the same issue, Gothard points out that God opens and closes the womb, and therefore childbearing should cease only when God closes the womb. God is therefore given sole responsibility for regulating the size of the family. (This is an uncharacteristic reversion to the sovereignty of God.) But God not only opens and closes the womb, but the eyes and ears as well. May we, then, say that because a person is not born blind he should spend his life sight-seeing? And if one can hear, he ought to listen to everything that can be heard? If there is something he ought not to hear, then God must be expected to close his ears? Of course not! God indeed bestows and withholds some bodily functions in people. The fact that a person has an ability does not dismiss his responsibility to *regulate* the use of that faculty. That men have lawful power to regulate the use and fruit of the womb is explicit in that they are commanded in the beginning to *be* fruitful. They are not to be passive but active in this. An opened womb is a blessing, as is any healthy faculty of the body, but it in no way implies unbridled use. And who is to say how many children fill a quiver (Psalm 127:4-5)? A few may fill one man's quiver as full as several may another's. If people have as many children as they can economically care for and profitably employ, their quiver is full. Obviously a couple with a farm could have a much larger quiver than a poor struggling family in a city ghetto.

Gothard's preoccupation with the scriptural command for all to be subject to higher authorities approaches obsession. Without taking time to explore the excesses advocated by the superstitious umbrella theory, it will be sufficient to note that in some cases he destroys the cornerstone of the New Covenant, which is the priesthood of every believer, the competence of every soul before God through Jesus Christ. In making the husband the woman's sole covering, and the offspring unconditionally submitted to his parents' will in the unmarried state, whatever his age, he creates a sort of patriarchal popery that is alien to the New Testament. In the light of the rampant spirit of rebellion today, and especially in view of his initial crusade for young people, this over-reaction is understandable. But we have hardly improved the situation when we swing error from one side of the ditch to the other.

One of the most outrageous abuses of scripture is the hedge of thorns fetish (Hosea 2:6). One's unfaithful spouse may be prevented from finding his/her lover by "building a hedge of thorns" about the wayward one. Then when they can no longer find their lover, they will return to the arms of the one they forsook. God does indeed put walls around His erring people, effectively preventing them from doing the evil they intend. He dries up their fountains, empties their table, makes their way barren and desolate until they return to Him. This is perfectly consistent with a God Who has chosen an elect people, Who determines to bring them to Himself and

conform them to the image of Christ. In the same book, we are told other means God uses to bring His erring people to repentance: *“For I will be unto Ephraim as a lion, and as a young lion to the house of Judah: I, even I, will tear and go away; I will take away, and none shall rescue him. I will go and return to my place, till they acknowledge their offense, and seek my face: In their affliction they will seek me early”* (Hosea 5:14-15).

What the Seminar is doing when it tells us how we can build a hedge of thorns and bring someone back to us is virtually inviting us to play God. We can choose who we want and irresistibly bring them to us, just like God can (*“Ye shall be gods, knowing . . .”*), if we know how.

Why build a hedge of thorns? May we not just as well apply Hosea 5:14-15? Tear and afflict them like a young lion. The same results are promised. *“In their affliction they shall seek me early.”*

Has God put this sort of power over other men in human hands? May we decide who is going to do what, and cause them to do it? God forbid! Preaching the gospel and prayer are means God has given us to use. But every person is responsible to God in his own behaviour.

But here comes the Seminar story. It works! So and so built a hedge of thorns about her adulterous husband and he returned to her. To that, I answer this: Water-witching works also. That forked stick actually dips down and points to water in the ground. Voodoo dolls work also. The witch doctor thrusts pins into the effigy of his enemy and that enemy feels the pain. *“But,”* someone protests, *“The Seminar uses scripture for the hedge of thorns.”* So does the witch who quotes Ezekiel 16:6 and stops bleeding from a wound. It works. But the blood has not been stopped by the word of God. That passage has nothing to do with healing hemorrhages. It is witchcraft at its worse: Using the Holy Scriptures as a fetish, like a rabbit’s foot or a chicken gizzard. The misuse of Hosea 2:6 is no better. That passage has nothing to say about restoring broken homes. It declares God’s sovereign irresistible grace in bringing a wicked adulterous people to be His holy ones.

Nor can this be construed as a variation of the scriptural means of prayer. It is nothing of the sort. Prayer is the exercise of a helpless believer holding up empty hands to a holy and able God, pleading with Him to have mercy and grant his request. The hedge of thorns fetish has a cocky and arrogant sinner making claims and demands upon God. He has found a means whereby he can secure his self-determined end, and he demands results. This is no more prayer than the faith-healer’s claim to be able to corner God by His *“promises”* and demand healing.

This principle and the principle of prayer are diametrically opposed. The first claims autonomy, humanistic self-determination and sufficiency. The latter confesses utter dependence, helpless faith, looking to a good, wise, holy and fully determinate God.

If one would pray for his mate to be restored, and any Christian certainly ought to do so, then by all means let him pray. But let us not be prescribing to God how it ought to be done. Is not the omniscience and the wisdom of the Almighty Creator a better source of means than a broken-hearted man with a misunderstood scripture verse?

All of this has been horribly negative. I am sorry that it had to be so. Bill Gothard does not deserve the tone of this paper. But I know of no better way to communicate truth than to put issues in sharp, shocking contrast with error. If the Seminar were preaching the true gospel of God’s grace, people would leave there filled with awe and wonder of God, hearts stirred to seek His face, to serve, love and adore Him. Instead, they leave with the flesh all agitated about various social issues, beside themselves with excitement over what they are going to get done now that they have finally discovered the secret of how to do it. God has been pushed and suppressed to a faint outline in the deep recesses of their minds, where He will remain, until they become disillusioned by the failure of the Seminar’s panaceas to produce what they claim, and they once again realize the creature’s utter dependence upon his Creator.

That being the case, the Seminar must be accounted, so far as preaching the gospel, as a fraud. A benevolent one, perhaps, but a fraud nonetheless, *IF* it claims to preach the gospel. If, on the other hand, it makes no such claims (and this may well be the case), and that it only professes to be a seminar pointing out psychological solutions to men’s social problems, then it has a high degree of validity and effectiveness.

Indeed, there is much in the Seminar to commend it. Gothard is on the right side of the fence in most everything: The Bible ought to be taken seriously, and it ought to be our guide-book for life in every issue. Rebellion should be brought under subjection to lawful authority. Separation and breaking up of homes is bad. Couples ought to marry for life, for better or worse. All homes ought to have children, if possible. Borrowing and debt ought to be avoided, if at all possible. Parents ought to educate their children, especially religiously. We ought to order our lives by scriptural principles instead of man-made rules. I especially appreciate Gothard’s aversion to the world’s publicity and news media, his perception of its utter inability to publicize a spiritual work in the right perspective. His courageous remarks about sickness and death being a time when people ought to be home with their families, rather than separated from them in a hospital, is a truth that deserves to be heralded from one end of the country to the other.

Gothard is to be commended for his high view of scripture. One could hardly sit through the lectures, where so much of the word of God is set forth, without being challenged to study it for himself, take it seriously and begin to apply its truth to his own life.

Because of its high visibility, the Seminars attract large numbers of people with desperate spiritual needs. And quite often God meets the needs of these people by truth set forth in the lectures. These people might have had their needs met just as quickly in a Bible-preaching local church which did not have the visibility and attraction of the Seminar.

We have already pointed out that the thing most attractive about a religious activity is its worst feature. Truth and holiness does not appeal to the public. If the Seminar were to remove its error, it would destroy its attraction, and the crowds would no longer attend. It would be reduced to the plain clear gospel that the rest of us preach. Is the loss of big crowds too great a price to pay for pure truth? Must we have unscriptural gimmicks to get a hearing for scriptural truth? Do the ends justify the means? I think not. But if so, then I would prefer the gimcrackery of local churches than the scriptural perversions of the Seminar. Better to have men coming

to watch the preacher swallow a goldfish, or a greased pig chase, than having them come because they have been taught a lie about the word of God.

The substance of this paper was communicated to Mr. Gothard in a letter dated March 21 of this year. Here is his reply:

Dear Mr. Murrell:

It has been at least ten years since I received the kind of conclusions that you have formulated in your letter. Now, as then, God has assured me that it is not my job to prove the work that He is accomplishing through the Seminar Ministry, but to glean what good I can from your letter and to continue on in the calling which He has given to me.

For whatever help it might be to you, the purpose of the Pastors Seminar was to explain to the pastors, at their request, how they could use the Seminar and its published resources to strengthen their own ministry.

The purpose of the Basic Seminar is to help Christians see that God does have a cause and effect relationship in His world and in the Christian life. When we violate His principles, we suffer the consequences. I believe that this truth is clearly taught in many Scriptures such as Galatians 6:7-8: (Quoted)

I do appreciate the efforts that you made to attend the Pastors Seminar and to communicate your thoughts to me. I have often begun Basic Seminars by saying that the road to "success" is paved with failure, and in my life I have been doing a lot of "paving". This is still true.

Sincerely in Christ

Bill

For those who may have attended or are planning to attend a Seminar, we pray that these observations will help you sort out and make better use of the good you may find.

- C. M.