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Chuck Colson and *The Body Book*

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Chuck Colson, special assistant to President Nixon and the hatchet man for that administration, became a Christian in prison during 1973. Three years later he founded Prison Fellowship International, a global ministry to prisoners and their families.

Over the past twenty years, Colson has become an influential voice in American evangelicalism. He has authored a number of significant books, beginning with his testimony in *Born Again and Life Sentence*. He continued with devotional and discipling books such as *Loving God* and *Who Speaks for God?* and moved from there to topical issues such as *Kingdoms in Conflict* and *Why America Doesn't Work*. In his most recent work, his magnum opus, he writes passionately about his concern for the body of Christ, both in its universal and local expression.

I. The Design of the Book.

The *Body* is divided into three parts. In Part I, Colson asks, "What is the Church?" He explains that the church is in an identity crisis, as it attempts to conform itself to the world rather than standing strong against the cultural secularism sweeping our country. Colson criticizes what has been called "hot tub religion"—a trend in Christendom that emphasizes health and wealth over the ministering to the lost.

In Part II, Colson addresses the subject of "The Church versus the World," outlining in nine chapters what the church must do to recapture its biblical orientation, including its fear of the Lord and a belief in moral absolutes.

In Part III, "The Church in the World," Colson urges the church and its members to be salt and light in a dark and desperate world.

II. The Delights of the Book.

1. The style:

All who have read Colson are fascinated by his clear style and cogent arguments. In *The Body* Colson shows himself once again to be a clever craftsman with words and a remarkable raconteur.

Theological discussion and contemporary observations alternate with vivid narratives of remote and recent church history and vignettes illustrating his points.

2. The subject matter:

It is difficult to find a better description of Luther's contribution to the Reformation than that given by Colson in chapters 18–19. For those interested in the exciting events surrounding the unraveling of

the Iron Curtain, chapter 16 is must reading. Colson shows how in answer to prayer the search of freedom succeeded in Eastern Europe, first in Hungary, then in East Germany, Romania, Czechoslovakia and in the Soviet Union. In his inimitable fashion, Colson recounts the experiences of modern heroes of the faith, such as Rumanian pastor Laszlo Tokes. The above sections make the perusal of the book a genuine delight. Those interested in statistics of the beliefs and behavior of American evangelicals will find the volume replete with them (p. 31, 42, 46, 186, 236, 304, 336, 343, 366).

Colson's book abounds with splendid observations, prompting the reader to amens and marginal notations. Here is just a sampling from *The Body*: "The church is not incidental to the great cosmic struggle for the hearts and souls of modern men and women. It is the instrument God has chosen for that battle..." (p. 33). "What the church needs most desperately is holy fear" (p. 37). "Holiness and biblical faithfulness are the true measures of the church" (p. 49). "Truth is not determined by majority vote. It is, by definition, objectively true whether anyone believes it or not" (p. 187). "The church must never confuse technique with truth. Times change; truth doesn't" (p. 239). "That the church is held in such low esteem reflects not only the depth of our biblical ignorance, but the alarming extent to which we have succumbed to the obsessive individualism of modern culture" (p. 276).

III. The Distinctives of the Book.

Colson highlights many truths that we as fundamentalists have held in high esteem but which have fallen by the wayside on the road traveled by evangelicals. For one, Colson's emphasis on the universal and local church is laudatory: "Of course every believer is part of the universal church. But for any Christian who has a choice in the matter, failure to cleave to a particular church is failure to obey Christ" (p. 277).

Very illuminating is Colson's commentary about his own book in an interview in the *Charismatic Ministries Today* magazine (March/April 1993). Here is his testimony: "I was a typical evangelical convert — you know, get up and give your testimony and that's it. I now realize that's not it at all. Building the body of Christ is the goal and object of the Christian life" (p. 57).

Another positive contribution is Colson's rejection of the "McChurch" mentality, a market-driven appeal to the sinner as consumer. He decries the health-and-wealth, name-it-and-claim-it heresy. "By responding to market pressures, the church forfeits its authority to proclaim truth and loses its ability to call members to account... But as alien and archaic as the idea may seem, the task of the church is not to make men and women happy; it is to make them holy" (p. 46).

Colson is properly critical of churches who disguise their identity by dropping the name "Baptist" or some other denominational tag (pp. 43-44).

A third commendable emphasis of Colson is his renewed commitment to propositional truth. "We must be convinced by faith and by compelling evidence that Scripture is inspired by God, authoritative and

without error in its original autographs” (p. 185). He calls the five historic Fundamentals “the backbone of orthodox Christianity” (p. 186).

IV. The Disappointment of the Book.

A disappointing feature of Colson’s book is his flip-flopping on theological issues (vestiges of Colson the politician?). As a Southern Baptist, Colson claims to be strong on believer’s baptism (p. 137) but he thinks church membership rather than baptism is the first step of discipleship (p.71). He argues that there are serious matters of doctrinal differences between “sacerdotal and nonsacerdotal churches... and we should not attempt to gloss over them as some twentieth century ecumenists have done” (p. 35). And yet, when fundamentalists question his inclusion of Catholics in the body of Christ, they are guilty of “the sin of presumption,” beset with “ill-informed prejudices” (p. 88, 109).

Colson deplors the secularization of America, “an ideology that places all emphasis on the here and now” (p. 172). Yet he quotes musician Amy Grant approvingly who said, “Of course I am trying to be secular. That’s the whole point. If I’m going to impact my culture, I need to come in on a different stage” (p. 375). With all of Colson’s healthy emphasis on propositional truth, Scriptural inerrancy and biblical discernment, his definition of the church in general and fundamentalism in particular is much more inclusive than ours. After listing the five Fundamentals (the infallibility of Scripture, deity of Christ, Virgin Birth, substitutionary atonement and physical resurrection and return) Colson insists that there are fundamentalists in every denomination—Catholic, Presbyterian, Baptists, Brethren, Methodists, Episcopal. . . Everyone who believes in the orthodox truths about Jesus Christ—in short, every Christian—is a fundamentalist” (p. 186).

Colson, who calls himself a “Baptist with a thoroughly Reformed theology” (p. 34) testifies that despite “strong doctrinal convictions, I have been enriched deeply by my fellowship with... my Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, and Lutheran brothers and sisters” (p. 106). Interestingly, Colson is rarely critical of Catholic Churches but comes down very harshly on Protestants (ch. 1 and 6).

In his interview in *Ministries Today*, Colson acknowledges that he has shifted. “I’ve gotten more conservative, more convinced of the historicity and the inerrancy of Scripture. I’ve also seen a transformation of thought toward the body as a whole. I’ve moved toward a much more inclusive view of Christianity” (p. 57). This inclusiveness applies to the charismatic movement and to Roman Catholicism. While few would deny that there are born again believers in the Catholic Church, the basic position of the Catholic Church on salvation through works remains unchanged (although Colson discerns “encouraging signs of change” [p. 109]). The Church has modernized and streamlined since Vatican II but has not surrendered a single major unbiblical doctrine. It is strange that while Colson on the one hand emphasizes sound doctrine, on the other he defends Mother Teresa as a wonderful Christian witness. It will be recalled that Mother Teresa organized the Catholic order of the Missionaries of Charity. Because of her work in the slums of Calcutta and her efforts for human dignity around the world, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979.

Colson, who insists that believers should “be discerning or challenge others where necessary” (p.88) says that those who question Mother Teresa’s genuine faith commit “the sin of presumption” (p. 88).

Mother Teresa’s indisputably unselfish ministry is not necessarily a proof of genuine salvation. The Apostle Paul speaks of counterfeit ministers of light (2 Cor. 11:14,15). Even a little research into the Catholic nun’s beliefs brings one to the conclusion that she bases her salvation on the sacraments rather than on simple faith. As one author says about her life as a nun, “The central act of the day was attendance with the community at mass. The Eucharist, the body and blood of Jesus. . . passed their lips. (Eileen Egan, *Such a Vision of the Street*, p. 21). “For Teresa the ‘real presence’ is never in doubt. . . Once when a clergyman attacked the dogma of the Eucharist in front of her nuns, she simply asked him never to set foot again in her convent.” (Robert Serrou, *Teresa of Calcutta*, p. 76).

The Catholic view is that salvation is communicated through the sacraments and earned by good works. In *Bible History*, a little Catholic volume introduced by a personal letter of commendation from the Pope, Richard Gilmore succinctly states that Luther “taught that faith without good works could secure man’s salvation, contrary to Catholic doctrine, which teaches that men are saved by faith with good works” (p. 293, emphasis in the original).

One would like to ask Charles Colson the following. If Mother Teresa is saved, what about Albert Schweitzer? This German philosopher, theologian, musician and missionary devoted his entire life to medical missions in Lambarene, Gabon, West Africa. Perhaps possessing the keenest mind of anyone in Europe in the twentieth century, he earned three doctorates (philosophy, 1899; theology, 1900; medicine, 1913). He left a brilliant career in Europe to minister to the needy in Africa. In 1954 he too was granted the Nobel Peace Prize. Was he saved or lost? If anyone evidenced “good works” it was Schweitzer. And yet in his *Quest for the Historical Jesus*, (1910) he concluded that Jesus was not the eternal son of God but merely a disillusioned eschatological prophet, who had mistakenly expected the establishment of the kingdom. In despair he allowed himself to be crucified. A sacrificial person is not necessarily a saved person. Many who say “Lord, Lord” have no personal relationship with Christ. It seems that Colson’s Body is beset by theological obesity. It includes too much. What he calls different church traditions are really fundamentally divergent doctrines and in the case of the Catholic Church, these differences relate directly to the doctrine of salvation.

Spurgeon had the right emphasis: “Neither when we have chosen our way can we keep company with those who go the other way. There must come with decision for truth a corresponding protest against error (Frontline, Sept./Oct. 1972, p. 8).

Colson wrote a good book. He wrote a needed book. But while he emphasizes unity and harmony, he is, in effect, weak on doctrinal purity. How splendid total harmony and unity would be within the church! We should certainly strive toward that ideal. And yet God needs to be worshipped “in Spirit and in truth” (John 4:24) as Herman Sasse says: “Unity can never be purchased with a lie, nor can discord ever be eliminated by sacrificing the truth of the gospel” (*Here We Stand*, p. 44).