

RASPUTIN IS ALIVE!

by Desmond Ford

ALMOST EVERYBODY has heard the name Rasputin, but very few know the meaning of that name. Rasputin's real name was Grigory Novykh. But he was given the surname Rasputin by local villagers while still a youth. The name means Debauchee. Before the age of twenty he had been influenced by a heretical religious sect and accepted their teaching that sinning was a necessary prerequisite to salvation.

Rasputin became a wandering "Holy Man." He had the reputation of possessing unusual abilities to cure the sick and was extremely popular with

many. He visited St. Petersburg in 1903 at a time when that city's high society was entertaining itself with mysticism and the occult. They received him warmly and he was introduced to the imperial family in November 1905, and eased the sufferings of the young Alexis, the son of Empress Alexandra. Alexis was a hemophiliac and heir to the Russian throne.

While in the company of members of the royal family, Rasputin maintained the posture of a holy man. But outside the palace he acquired numerous mistresses and

seduced a large number of women. By the end of that decade everybody except the royal family regarded him as a profligate. But complaints to the emperor were ignored.

During World War I when the Russian emperor had personal command of the army, Rasputin became chief advisor to the empress who had much to do with the controlling of domestic matters. Probably as a result of Rasputin's influence, many capable officials were now replaced by unscrupulous substitutes and the war effort was greatly hindered. Next came a

conspiracy designed to rectify matters by assassinating Rasputin. He was invited to the home of one of the princes for a midnight supper and there he ate cakes and drank wine that had been poisoned. Because he gave no sign of reacting adversely to the poison, his host panicked and shot him. Despite his wounds, Rasputin fled to the courtyard where he was shot again and then bound and thrown through a hole in the ice into the Neva River where he finally died.

The phenomenon of a man professing holiness engaging in profligacy is not one limited to Russia in the early part of the twentieth century. Strangely, there have been abundant parallels through all the centuries in many places. Sin is exceedingly subtle and wears many guises. If one reads the classic *The Pilgrims Progress*, one encounters Talkative. He, too, thinks he is bound for the Holy City and he has a mouth full of religious jargon which he's happy to release to all who will listen. Bunyan has him refuted and rebuked by the true pilgrims to Zion.

Many shepherds of the flock have felt it their duty to warn against what has theologically become known as antinomianism. Particularly is this the case at times of revival of the gospel. Wherever the good news of grace is proclaimed, and the message of the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness, there are always unbalanced minds who twist the heavenly truths. This happened in the days of Luther, the Wesleys and indeed during every revival known to church history.

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There is a fascinating book written by Hannah Whitall Smith entitled *Religious Fanaticism*. Hannah Whitall Smith was ideally suited for the writing of this volume. She was very prominent in religious revivals of the nineteenth century and was the author of widely read books which brought blessing to millions. Constantly she found her own work impeded by religious enthusiasts who

lacked either balance or integrity and this particular book is the result of those experiences. The book concludes with this gem:

Pure religion undefiled was altogether apart from them, and resided not in the region of the emotions, but in the region of the will. 'Pure religion', says Fenelon, 'resides in the will alone'. And again, 'the will to love God is the whole of religion'. I endorse these sayings with all my heart and am thankful beyond words that out of all my feverish search for emotional religion I was brought at last to see that a quiet steadfast holding of the human will to the will of God and a peaceful resting in His love and care is of infinitely greater value in the religious life than the most intense emotions or the most wonderful 'experiences' that have ever been known by the greatest 'mystic' of them all.¹

Hannah Smith felt that the root of many religious aberrations was uncontrolled reliance upon feelings and emotions. Her own husband was a very emotional man, and at the height of his powers made a mistake in his relationship to the other sex which cut short his career and led to a collapse in his health and an early death. No wonder then that his wife in all subsequent years called upon Christians to check their impressions with Scripture and to remember that emotion as God's gift was like the waters of a river bringing blessing and fruitfulness only if rightly hemmed in and directed.

Religious historian Merle D'Aubigne wrote:

Whenever a great religious ferment takes place in the Church, some impure elements always appear with the manifestations of truth. We see the rise of one or more false reforms proceeding from man, and which serve as a testimony or countersign to the real reform. Thus many false

messiahs in the time of Christ testified that the real Messiah had appeared. The Reformation of the sixteenth century could not be accomplished without presenting a similar phenomenon.²

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D'Aubigne has a chapter in this book (which is an abridgement of his History of the Reformation) entitled *The New Prophets*. These were men who aspired at direct revelations from heaven as a priority above holiness of heart. They had no wish to be tied to the word of God and felt that they could be guided by impressions from the Spirit.

A simple clothier, Nicholas Storch by name, announced that the angel Gabriel had appeared to him during the night, and that after communicating matters which he could not yet reveal, said to him: 'Thou shalt sit on my throne.' A former student of Wittenberg, one Mark Stubner, joined Storch, and immediately forsook his studies; for he had received direct from God (said he) the gift of interpreting the Holy Scriptures. Another weaver, Mark Thomas, was added to their number; and a new adept, Thomas Munzer, a man of fanatical character, gave a regular organization to this rising sect. Storch, desirous of following Christ's example, selected from among his followers twelve apostles and seventy-two disciples. All loudly declared, as a sect in our own day has done, that apostles and prophets were at length restored to the Church of God.³

The result of all of this was the famous or rather infamous Peasants Revolt which in the name of Christ was responsible for so much devastation, profanation and shame on the cause of true religion.

All error is dangerous, but the error which is most dangerous is that which seems closest to the truth. It is in the grand epistle on justification by faith that two questions are raised—Do we then make void the law through faith? Shall we sin then that grace may abound? In other words, the apostle was telling us that wherever the truth of God's free grace is proclaimed aberrations of doctrine and behavior spring up as a result of unbalanced minds and immature or incomplete perceptions of truth. W. H. Fitchett wrote long ago that "Truth is often of a scale too large for the tiny curve of human vision; and in partial truth there is deadly peril. Heresy itself is often truth only half seen, or seen in distorted perspective."⁴

In Wesley's day there came a breach with the Moravians on this very issue. Wesley was in debt to the Moravians for his understanding of the gospel. Nevertheless, he found among this group antinomian teachings and behavior which threatened the revival beginning to spread throughout all England. It was in 1739 that Philip Henry Molther, a Moravian minister, had come to London. He was a man of many gifts and was deeply mystical. His views of truth were narrow and at times distorted. He rightly affirmed that Christ was, for a believer, everything. So logically "all beside was nothing." What he forgot was that some things which will not pass before God as roots are nevertheless acknowledged by him as fruits. Molther taught that the ordinary duties of Christian morality and the simplest acts of Christian worship were irrelevant and sometimes even evil. Inevitably some of Molther's followers abused his teachings, and the result was instant and visible mischief in the new societies of Methodism. Charles Wesley described those who had accepted the new theology: "Lazy and proud in themselves, bitter and censorious towards others, they trample on the ordinances and despise the commands of Christ." John Wesley wrote in his journal thus:

My soul is sick of this sublime

divinity. Let me think and speak as a little child! Let my religion be plain, artless, simple! Meekness, temperance, patience, faith, and love, be these my highest gifts; and let the highest words wherein I teach them be those I learned from the Book of God!

When Wesley addressed the societies where the heresy was spreading, he was told bluntly that he was preaching up the works of the law which, as believers, they were no more bound to obey as subjects than they were bound to obey the law of France.

One of them said, when publicly expounding Scripture, that as many went to hell by praying as by thieving. Another said, 'You have lost your first joy; therefore you pray; that is the devil.' You read the Bible; that is the devil. You communicate (take the ordinances); that is the devil.⁵

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In our day it is rare that antinomianism should be as blatant as that. But it has many subtle forms. Whenever holy talk is not accompanied by a holy walk, that is antinomianism. Whenever man uses the righteousness of Christ as an excuse for sin, that is antinomianism. And the very worst antinomianism of all is to assume that belief in the truth is sufficient to face the judgment bar of God, and that faith, hope and love are not essential in the daily life at home and abroad. It is so easy to forget that "the devils believe and tremble" (Jas 2:19).

The very strength of the cross lies in its two-fold revelation of

God's hatred of sin and his love for the sinner. To accept one without the other is not the gospel. What God has joined together, man should not put asunder. Law and gospel go together, faith and works go together, justification and sanctification go together. There are things which must be kept distinct but which should never be separated. We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone. We are not saved by faith plus works but by a faith that works. God always gives his gifts with both hands—justification and sanctification. He justifies no one that he does not proceed to sanctify.

Who can read the teachings of Jesus without seeing his view of the matter? It was he who told the story of the two builders at the close of the Sermon on the Mount and concluded the story with a punch line about obedience. It was Jesus who declared: "Why do you call me Lord, Lord and do not the things that I say?" In ten different ways, on the last night of his life, to the disciples in the upper room he said, "If you love me, keep my commandments."

The path of truth and the path of error are very close together like the dividing line at the points of railway tracks. But the failure to see that the cross of Christ has for its purpose our total redemption and our deliverance from sin's power as well as its guilt is to have a truncated gospel. Believers must indeed die to law as a method of salvation, but they never die to obedience as a standard of salvation. If our Lord was "obedient unto death" so must we be.

In his little book entitled *Today's Gospel—Authentic or Synthetic?* Walter Chantry writes:

The evangelical wing of the partisan church is saturated with doctrine and practices which have no biblical foundation. Many teachings and habits touching the Gospel are as much the products of human invention and tradition as were the indulgences of Tetzels. And certain doctrines in our midst are quite as dangerous.

In the central issue of the way of salvation, large segments of

Protestantism are engrossed in neo-traditionalism. We have inherited a system of evangelistic preaching which is unbiblical. Nor is this tradition very ancient. Our message and manner of preaching the gospel cannot be traced back to the Reformers and their creeds. They are much more recent innovations. Worse, they cannot be traced to the Scriptures. They have clearly arisen from superficial exegesis and a careless mixture of twentieth century reason with God's revelation.

When excitement of the latest campaign has subsided, when the choir sings no more thrilling choruses, when large crowds no longer gather, when the emotional hope and the evangelist's 'invitation' has moved to another city, what do we have that's real and lasting?

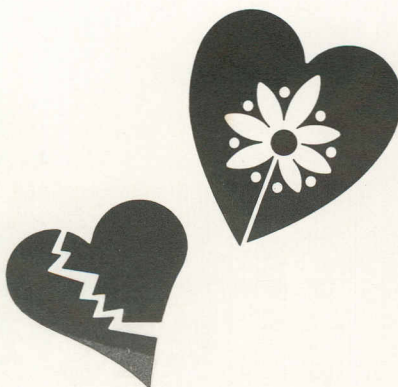
The resulting product is a dangerous conglomerate—just the sort that Satan uses to delude the souls of sinners. What cult does not learn to use verses of the Bible and half truths to establish their lives? That has been the devil's strategy from the beginning (Genesis 3:5). By selling another gospel to our generation, Satan has been employing many sincere men in preaching a dethroned Christ. The glories of the Savior are being hidden even from his servants because preachers will not give careful attention to the gospel of God's word alone.

Products of modern evangelism are often sad examples of Christianity. They make a profession of faith, and then continue to live like the world. 'Decisions for Christ' mean very little. Only a small proportion of those who 'make decisions' evidence the grace of God in a

transformed life. When excitement of the latest campaign has subsided, when the choir sings no more thrilling choruses, when large crowds no longer gather, when the emotional hope and the evangelist's 'invitation' has moved to another city, what do we have that's real and lasting? When every house in a mission village has been visited, what has been done? The honest heart answers, 'very little.' There's been a great deal of noise and dramatic excitement, but God has not come down with his frightful power and converting grace.

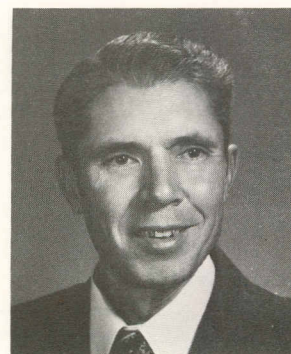
All of this is related to the use of a message in evangelism that's unbiblical. The truth necessary for life has been hidden in a smokescreen of human inventions. On the shallow ground of man's logic, large numbers have been led to assume they have a right to have lasting life and have been given an assurance which does not belong to them. Evangelicals are swelling the ranks of the deluded with a perverted Gospel. Many have 'made decisions' in modern churches and been told in the inquiry rooms that their sins have been forgiven, will be surprised as Tetzels customers to hear 'I never knew you; depart from me' (Mt 7:23).⁶

Nothing less than a broken heart will do. This is always the result of beholding God's love and grace in



the gospel. Such a heart will not only cry, 'Thou, O Christ, art all I want; more than all in thee I find,' but also, 'What shall I render to the Lord for all his benefits towards me?' Having given him our hearts in response to his so great salvation, is there anything, great or small, that we would want to keep from him 'who loved us and gave himself for us'?

1. H.W. Smith, *Religious Fanaticism*, p. 270
2. M. D'Aubigne, *The Life and Times of Martin Luther*, p. 496.
3. Ibid, p. 497.
4. W.H. Fitchett, *Wesley and His Century*, p. 305.
5. Ibid, p. 307.
6. W. Chantry, *Today's Gospel, Authentic or Synthetic*, pp. 12-15.



DESMOND FORD

HAVE mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me.

Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done *this* evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified *when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.*

Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.

Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden *part* thou shalt make me to know wisdom.

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones *which* thou has broken may rejoice.

Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities.

—Psalm 51:1-9