

# Affirmation 2010 Deals With Critics

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The adverse criticism levelled at Affirmation 2010 in a good number of Christian magazines and digital publications has moved The Bible League Trust (BLT) to over-react with an eight point, five-paged rebuttal claiming that all such criticisms are unfounded, ill-conceived, fallacious, confused and indicate a departure from sound teaching. In their condemnation of honest criticism, they sarcastically denigrate the intelligence, integrity and orthodoxy of their critics. Besides choosing to exonerate themselves by ridiculing those who question their policies, they play down this opposition, claiming that they have only found 'one or two critiques'. This must be the understatement of the year as their 'critical responses' themselves refer to a much larger number of concerned people.

We have now a lengthy supplement to the 16 points of Affirmation 2010 I, proving it was a miscarriage in the first place. Unhelpfully, the 'critical responses' in Affirmation II merely deal with secondary issues, leaving out the more serious criticism levelled against Affirmation I. Internet watch-dogs have been quick to criticise this inexcusable deficiency. The full BLT article is available on their website, but here are the salient features. So let us take a look at the BLT's eight noisy canons which are meant to frighten off a cheeky sparrow or two.

## **Affirmation**

Contrary to the BLT's leading statement 'An affirmation of the Biblical doctrine we seek firmly to believe and strenuously to maintain', Affirmation II denies that they are putting forward 'a new Confession' but merely stating 'truth presently being undermined in our churches'. These undermined truths are, however, not stated. Nevertheless, the compilers are left 'wondering' if their critics 'have taken the time carefully to read the Affirmation'. Obviously, they have not taken the time to check Affirmation themselves. Their reluctance to be fair here is understandable as the heresies and errors currently undermining the gospel in today's evangelical, Reformed churches are chiefly spread by those hiding behind Affirmations I and II. These are: their denigrating of the Word of God; their promoting a god of three wills; their watering down of the gospel which saves; their emphasis on Natural Theology; their teaching that Christ died in vain for the majority for whom he died; the idea that faith and sanctification are matters of law and not grace; the denial that man is responsible for his fallen state; their preparationism; their probationism and their claim that those who disagree with them are Hyper-Calvinists and Antinomians.

## **Infallibility of Scripture**

Instead of repenting of their current support of Stuart Olyott and Iain Murray who are bent on downgrading the Word of God, they enter into a pseudo-theological debate on text critical theories which is far beyond their competence and which means nothing to the man in the pew who wishes to serve his Saviour faithfully. This airing of mock-scholarship, which shows alarming and dangerous ignorance of the subject, is given as proof that the BLT 'supports the historic, orthodox Protestant position'. It is not a specific collection of MSS which has given rise to Affirmation I's position but their misinterpretation of them. If Affirmation I does not know what it is talking about, how can others guess what it means?

## **The Trinity**

Under this very misleading heading no criticism of the doctrine is aired and no position is stated and defended. Instead, a questionable quarrel is commenced with those who have misinterpreted such ambiguous Affirmation I words as 'the God we own'. A good preacher, however, explains his text so that such easy misunderstandings do not occur. Instead the BLT ridicules those misled, claiming they do not understand basic English. Following the rules of basic English the pun on 'own' must have been intentional or Affirmation I does not understand basic English. More to the point, the Anti-Trinitarianism preached by Malcolm Watts and other subscribers is not mentioned for discussion. The BLT proudly claim that they find little dissent concerning their doctrine of the Trinity. Where information is withheld by the preacher, how can the hearer be knowledgeable of it?

## **The Doctrines of Grace**

The BLT makes no apology for leaving out most of these doctrines, claiming they are basing their position, whatever it is, on most of the main things found in the narrow selection of Westminster (1658), Savoy (1658) and the Second Baptist London (1689) Confessions. Yet, these confessions were designed in a most turbulent period to highlight confessional differences rather than similarities, otherwise all three would have kept to the fifteen or so major Reformed confessions hitherto published and to which most Reformed men still subscribe. The BLT, however, affirm that Affirmation I simply does 'not deal with matters on which genuine Evangelicals might differ'. The examples given are church government and the sacraments. Are these thus 'inessentials', like vestments? And what about the call of the gospel and the dire need for evangelism which is treated differently in the few confessions referred to, though all three are far more explicit and evangelically minded than Affirmation I? Indeed, on the Christian duty to preach the gospel and how this can be put into practice Affirmation I is totally silent. Furthermore, contrary to their boast that they are for peace amongst Evangelicals, they repeatedly claim that Affirmation I separates itself from the teaching of those who will not or are not allowed to sign their 'Confession'.

### **The Sabbath**

Affirmation claims that their critics are wrong on the Sabbath as taught in the Westminster Standards, but was the Westminster Assembly (WA) correct? The Westminster Confession (WC) Chapter on Worship and the Sabbath (XXIII) puts the Light of Nature, following Rutherford's *Lex Rex*, on a par with Scripture. I reject such a heresy strongly! Furthermore, the BLT argues incorrectly that the Standards teach the same as Independent and Baptist Confessions. This is certainly not the case, especially in the London Baptists' Declarations of Faith which reveal one mind and one heart in contrast with the very mixed members of the WA who were severely divided denominationally, politically and philosophically. Furthermore, the WC has been so tampered with in the last two centuries that it is difficult to find its original testimony in current versions. Whole chapters have been added, especially in American editions (see Hendry's *The Westminster Confession for Today*). The Second London Baptist Confession however, contains excellent contemporary corrections on the WC original, especially concerning the call of the Gospel and the covenantal offer of salvation. Making misleading statements does not help, nor does ignoring differences as if this were better than striving to solve them peacefully.

### **Reverence in Worship**

This is way off the mark! Merely making an appeal to put on one's best Blues Brothers dark suit or best Gracie Fields long dress on a Sunday rather than a careful Biblical analysis of what worship entails is most unhelpful. I, too, have been recently amazed by men and women in church dressed most slovenly but I wonder which unwise pastor nowadays would send a man home to put on a tie or tell a woman to wear a more discreet

hat! We know what Affirmation II is getting at and sympathise, but the way they bend Scripture to justify their points is unacceptable.

### **The Regulative Principle**

This phrase has become a hat to fit many heads and allows pastors to invent new pseudo-Biblical laws. The early Scottish Reformers used this to keep up a seven-tier ministry (see Knox's works), Englishman Thomas Cartwright used it to prove that elders were senior to bishops (see his quarrels with Whitgift) and modern legalists sing the Regulative Principle's praises by putting worship into a straitjacket (see some of Affirmation I's subscribers). Malcolm Watts uses it to prove almost anything. I sympathise with Affirmation I's stance on both the Sabbath and hymn-singing but I cannot accept their legalism in attaining their aims. Most of the defence of the so-called Regulative Principle comes from an appeal (as here) to Westminster or Affirmation I but I have not seen a sound, comprehensive, Bible-only defence from their side yet. Has the phrase any positive meaning these days?

### **The Danger of Creating Division**

Oddly and surprisingly enough, Affirmation I does not see this danger. Liberals and Modernists cause divisions, not Affirmation I, they claim. I honestly think that Watts, Roberts and Co. are the more dangerous dividers as they profess to be inside where they divide and not outside where Modernists and Liberals stand. Their fond aim is to unite 'good men' under Affirmation I yet the standard around which such 'conservative men' must unite is as ambiguous as their 'owning God' passage. They reject all those dogmatically, defiantly and definitely who do not agree with their new creed. This is Affirmation I's Achilles' heel. Steve Owen, who kindly passed on 'the Critical Responses' to me has succinctly summed up Affirmation I's fierce rejection of other Christians in his Martin Marprelate blog, arguing:

"Sad to say, the writers of the Affirmation seem to be like the Bourbon kings of France of whom it was said that they learned nothing and forgot nothing. They have made no real attempt to understand the issues involved. Specifically, there is nothing in their response that tackles my main point of criticism; namely that the Affirmation does not distinguish between primary and secondary issues. They write, 'Nowhere is it stated that we intend to "separate" from those unable to endorse everything included in the Affirmation.' But it is!! Over and over again the document says, 'we reject this; we reject that,' and there is no distinction made between those who deny the Trinity and those who don't wear dark suits and ties (which are actually as 'worldly' as you can get since they are the garb of bankers and politicians). There is a whole article on Separation (how much better if there had been one on preaching the Gospel!) which begins, '**We affirm** the duty of making clear testimony to our Faith by separating from all error.' What are these errors from which they are determined to separate if not those very things that they have been 'rejecting'?"

Shaken by the criticisms that Baptist principles are left out of Affirmation I, the BLT end with two lengthy paragraphs on Spurgeon. Just as Mr Atlee said many nice things about Mr Churchill and visi versa, nobody expected them to vote for each other. Similarly, no matter how Affirmation II might pat Spurgeon on the back, do they really think he would have signed their nebulous, new, downgrading creed? I think not.

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