A couple of weeks ago I was asked by a friend from out of state to look at a book, Under Cover by John Bevere, although the book is not new it is just now making the rounds among the leadership of his church. This friend is a layman who has been a Christian for many years and has seen many fads and movements come and go, as have I. He reacted quite strongly to the teaching as it is being explained around his church noting that those who are reading the book are insisting that God speaks to our pastor and our pastor speaks to us. We have no right to question what the pastor says. We are bound to submit and obey. He saw great similarity between this teaching, on spiritual authority and covering=spiritual protection with the Shepherding Movement/Discipleship Movement of the 1970’s and 80’s which was founded by Bob Mumford, Derek Prince, Charles Simpson and Don Basham as a result of moral failure in a charismatic ministry in South Florida.

The teachings of the movement focused upon accountability, obedience and submission to spiritual authority. From the idea of submission to authority, to the equating of the authority of the leader to the authority of God, has proven historically to be a short step. What happens is that the leader’s voice is equated with the voice of God and those who disagree are seen as in rebellion. In the Shepherding Movement, this step was taken and the movement became controlling and abusive. Ultimately both Mumford and Prince repented of their errors in teaching and left the movement.

Another movement with similar practices founded in 1979 was the Boston Movement. (renamed :International Churches of Christ (ICC)). New members are required to meet with older members daily. New members who disagree with older members are told they are rebelling against God. Submission to church leaders is demanded. New members are told whom to date, how to spend their money and how to spend their free time. In 2003 Kip McKean founder of the Boston Movement resigned confessing that the church leaders “[had] engaged in financial mismanagement, legalism, dishonest statistical reporting, and abusive teachings, and have ignored critics.”

Last week I talked to my pastor, who although he is solidly Reformed in his theology now, comes out of a Pentecostal background. He shared that this type of teaching is common in Pentecostal circles noting that within Pentecostalism there is a love of invoking OT imagery and drawing theological conclusions from that imagery without taking into account a substantial discontinuity between the ways God established for Israel and the fact that there has been a tremendous change under the New Covenant inaugurated by the “Christ Event” (the death, resurrection & ascension) followed by the inauguration of the church at Pentecost. Drawing upon OT imagery Pentecostalism stresses particularly the authority/power/rights of the minister as God’s anointed one.

Bevere’s thesis is that submission to spiritual authority gives covering and protection. Conversely, to disobey spiritual authority is to place oneself in the arena of Satan with the clear implication that one who disobeys by failing to submit to spiritual authority is open to demonic attack. The same is true if the spiritual authority is challenged. He says:

“If those under authority take the yoke of judgment upon themselves as judges over their established leaders, they no longer are submitted to established authority, but have elevated themselves as judges over their leaders. Their hearts are lifted up in pride
above the ones God placed over them. They have exalted themselves over the ordinance and counsel of God.” (116)

Bevere makes many good, right and true points. We do not live in a spiritual democracy and authority is something with which we as twenty-first century Americans have great problems with. Living less than 20 miles from UC Berkeley I regularly see bumper stickers with the slogan “Question Authority” boldly emblazoned on them. But although I recognize this as a problem I have serious problems with Bevere’s approach and his whole thesis on several different levels, some methodological, some exegetical, some theological.

What follows are more or less disconnected observations and specific examples of problems and issues that jumped out at me as I read. These criticisms are by no means exhaustive, and the weightiest are at the end.

- Intended or not, and despite all the claims to humility, I sense an underlying arrogance. The first time I ever sensed this type of arrogance in an author was many years ago when I first read The Light and The Glory by Peter Marshall and David Manuel. That book is a reinterpretation of American history that makes the argument that America is the new covenant nation akin to ancient Israel. As one reviewer said, “It is not good history. It is not even good fiction.” Nevertheless it has become a favorite among the homeschoolers in the US. (But I digress.) What absolutely drove me crazy was that the authors’ repeatedly invoked the leading of the Holy Spirit to substantiate their claims that theirs was the right interpretation. Likewise, Bevere invokes the voice of God throughout the book telling him in words that his teaching is the truth. These claims place an author above criticism, because to take issue with these claims is to reject divine revelation. While I don’t want to get sidetracked about prophecies and words of knowledge I do want to mention that in 1 Thess. 5 Paul tells (or as Bevere might say: commands) his readers to:

not treat prophecies with contempt.

But examine all things;

Paul is apparently telling his hearers not to reject prophecies, but to examine them, and hold fast to those which pass muster but reject those that are evil.[1] To put this another way, what the Lord says to one individual must be verified by the church as a whole. It is not a case of “God speaks to the pastor and the pastor speaks to us.” We are all sinful, and depraved and prone to interpret our own deep desires as the word or will of God. (As a parenthetical note: this issue with central authority is particularly rooted in the mindset of the Western [Roman Catholic and Protestant] churches. Authority in the Eastern Orthodox Church is and has always been communal.)

My wife tells the story of when she was first in college one of her classmates told her that God had told him that she was to marry him. Her response? “God has not told that to me.” (I have heard this from numerous female college students over the years that young men whom they hardly knew were told by God that the particular girl in question was to be their wife. Apparently young men (with raging hormones) are sensitive to the voice of God and the young women are not!)
Years ago when I first taught at Simpson College, I had a student who was so “in tune with God” that as he was walking down the corridors of the college he would carry on a conversation with God. This was not normal prayer. He was hearing God’s responses to what he verbalized within the hearing of all. (He was one of the first students I met at Simpson and I wondered what I had gotten myself into.) Over the next two years he matured quite a bit and decided to go to my alma mater Dallas Seminary. He graduated and became a pastor in Hayward, the next city over from where I have lived for 25 years. I haven’t seen him since he returned to the Bay Area but I recently found out some of what had gone on in recent years. He was convinced that God had told him to move his inner city blue collar church to the suburbs about 15-20 miles away. The church dutifully followed his lead as the will of God. The congregation however did not fit in the suburbs. Things went from bad to worse and the church fired him as their pastor and called another pastor. But since God had called him to this church he wouldn’t leave. It got so bad that finally the church had to call in the police and have him arrested for trespassing.

· As an exegete and a theologian I have a tremendous problem with the way Bevere handles the text of scripture. He nowhere builds a case with solid exegesis and theological thinking/ reflection that his thesis is valid. Instead he assumes from the first paragraph that he is right and mixes stories, prooftexts and examples drawn out of context from the breadth of scripture and from his experiences. His prooftexts are often pulled totally out of context and treated as timeless aphorisms rather than time-bound, culture-bound and context-bound statements that cannot simply be lifted out of their contexts without doing violence to their meaning. Likewise, he regularly leverages one biblical story against another and bridges them with anecdotes that tie the parts together artificially to make them serve his agenda.

As one who teaches Hermeneutics (biblical interpretation) on the seminary level I must say that if one of my students submitted an assignment that applied such interpretive practices, I would give the paper a failing grade and instruct the student to rework the assignment using proper hermeneutical method.

· With reference to exegesis, he occasionally appeals to the meaning of Greek terms but employs sources that are out of date, and even these he uses improperly, building cases from lexical definitions and forcing those lexical definitions into contexts in which they do not fit. He seems to have little to no grasp of the universally understood hermeneutical principle that meaning is determined by context.

On other occasions he redefines terms to fit the point he is hammering, e.g. in James 2 he redefines works as “obedient actions” and quotes James 2:20-24, 26 substituting “obedient actions” for works throughout. (217)

In his exposition of the verse “rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft” (1 Sam 15:23) Bevere attempts to retranslate the verse as “rebellion is witchcraft” since the Hebrew text infers the “is.” Again, he plays fast and loose with the meaning of the text as understood by the translators who are expert in Hebrew, to make points homiletically.

He then continues to build a case that since rebellion is witchcraft those in rebellion fall under the curse placed upon those who practice witchcraft. In this context he takes Paul’s rhetorical question to the Galatian churches, “O foolish Galatians, Who has
bewitched you . . .? He states: “The bewitchment involved in disobeying God’s word, not any curses that sorcerers conjured up, Why? Because rebellion is witchcraft! In essence the church in Galatia came under a witchcraft curse because of disobedience.” (76)

· Years ago, I wrote my Th.M. thesis on the book of Galatians (for those who are interested, I applied the method of Discourse Analysis to the entire books of Galatians. It is posted at: http://www.bible.org/series.php?series_id=73 ) This was a slow and painstaking analysis that took more than four hundred hours to complete. The point was to trace the argument (the case Paul was building) of Galatians. I discovered something remarkable. Everything stated in Galatians leads up to or flows from Galatians 5:1: “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm then and do not be subject to the yoke of slavery.” In chapter 1 he calls down imprecations from heaven on anyone who would corrupt the simple gospel of Christ: “. . . If we (or an angel from heaven) should preach a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be condemned to hell! As we have said before, and now I say again, “if anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let him be condemned to hell!”

Paul was here talking about the simplicity of the gospel which was being compromised by those who wanted to add the Torah (Jewish law with all its ceremonies and particularly circumcision as its sign) but the application is wider. Many teachings have arisen over the centuries that promise protection, provision, perfection and the like. They sound good at the front end, but the results are bondage.

The phenomenon of spiritual abuse is not new. In 3 John 9 the apostle recounts spiritual abuse under the guise of authority in the person of Diotrophes.[2]

· There is a radically different ministry of the Holy Spirit in the OT as opposed to the NT. In the OT the priest was truly that, a priest who stood between the worshiper and God. In the OT not even the priests were regularly indwelt with the Holy Spirit, and the High Priest was only allowed into the actual presence of God once per year, on Yom Kippur. At the death of Christ the veil of the temple was rent top to bottom signifying that access to the very presence of God was now available to all. This leads directly into the New Testament concept of the priesthood of all believers and the reality that all believers partake equally of the Holy Spirit. Each is indwelt personally. Paul goes so far on one occasion as to identify each believer as a temple of God through the presence of the Spirit. Each believer has direct access to God without having to go through a priest or a minister. We are members of one another. A dominant image is the church is that of the body. It is not that of a spiritual aristocracy that is responsible only to God and not to the rest of the believers. There are different roles, clearly, but they are roles of service, not the authority of a dictator.

· While perhaps less problematic than some of the other weaknesses underlying the book I find a strain of ethical absolutism that denies that there are any gray areas in moral judgments. Every situation has a right and a wrong. I believe that this position, while on the surface is attractive it is not ultimately defensible. This feeds into his thesis that we must be under cover, submitted to our spiritual authorities so as not to sin and incur divine judgment.

· In the second section of Under Cover “God’s Direct Covering,” Bevere discusses the nature of sin claiming a definitive understanding from 1 John 3:4, “Sin is lawlessness.” This claim is utterly reductionistic. I hear in the background John Wesley’s definition of
sin as “a conscious act of willful disobedience (to a known law).” While this approach on the surface claims to treat sin seriously, in reality it utterly trivializes sin, reducing it to an act of the will, a choice.

In fact in the Old Testament these sins (of willful disobedience) could not be atoned for by sacrifice. Both biblically and theologically sin is radical (from the Latin radix meaning root). If sin were merely an act of the will all we would need is strong wills to defeat it. In reality sin goes to the depth of our being. There is no part of our existence that has not been touched by its tentacles. Radical fallenness calls not for reformation, but radical redemption.

· More problematic yet is the framework in which Bevere builds his teaching. This framework is legal rather than relational. As I noted earlier, much of what Bevere has to say is true and right, but the framework in which something is presented has a profound effect on the way it is taken in. Merely having all the right pieces is not enough.

In the late second century Irenaeus, the great bishop of Lyons and opponent of Gnosticism wrote:

“Their manner of acting is just as if one, when a beautiful image of a king has been constructed by some skilful artist out of precious jewels, should then take this likeness of the man all to pieces, should rearrange the gems, and so fit them together as to make them into the form of a dog or of a fox, and even that but poorly executed; and should then maintain and declare that this was the beautiful image of the king which the skilful artist constructed, pointing to the jewels which had been admirably fitted together by the first artist to form the image of the king, but have been with bad effect transferred by the latter one to the shape of a dog, and by thus exhibiting the jewels, should deceive the ignorant who had no conception what a king’s form was like, and persuade them that that miserable likeness of the fox was, in fact, the beautiful image of the king” Against Heresies 1:8:1 (http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0103108.htm)

Another example of framework affecting the way a doctrine is taken in can be seen in the difference in presentation of the doctrine of predestination between Calvin and Theodore Beza, his successor at Geneva. Calvin does not discuss the topic of predestination until book three of the Institutes of the Christian Religion after he has discussed at length the grace of God and the experience of that grace when the believer is incorporated into Christ. With that context having been set, he discusses predestination in the context of the love and acceptance of the believer vouchsafed by both the witness of the Spirit in the heart of the believer and the promise of Scripture. Beza, on the other hand, moves the discussion of the concept of predestination from the doctrine of salvation and places it under the doctrine and attributes of God. While not changing the teaching, this repositioning of the doctrine of predestination changed the whole tenor of its truth. In Calvin it functioned as a comfort, under Beza and the later Reformers it gave the feel that God was distant and arbitrary and that man (oops—I need to be politically correct) human beings were but marionettes whose strings were being pulled. It was a cold I-it relationship rather than a warm personal I-thou relationship (to use Martin Buber’s terminology).

My point here is that Bevere places his discussion within the framework of performance, the framework of slaves not sons and in so doing existentially compromises the transforming effect of the gospel in the life of the believer.
· Bevere quotes Romans 13:1ff as an absolute command, and then broadens it from the context of civil authorities/rulers to the sphere of spiritual authority.

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except by God’s appointment, and the authorities that exist have been instituted by God. So the person who resists such authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will incur judgment. (NET)

In its context judgment refers clearly to the police and court system. In the shift to spiritual authority Bevere turns this judgment into a direct spiritual judgment from God—something nowhere even suggested in the passage.

Quoting these verses alone make them sound absolute, however if we are even to look at the book of Acts and Galatians, we get quite a different picture.

Early in the book of Acts the apostles are arrested in the temple and ordered not to preach about Christ and the resurrection. The response was not one of obedience and submission—remember the Sanhedrin were both political and religious authorities in Israel (under the higher authority of Rome)—instead there was a challenge (Acts 4:19ff) on the occasion of their first arrest, and flat out defiance on their second appearance before the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:27ff).

Paul too, on the basis of his Roman citizenship regularly challenged the Roman authorities when they overstepped their bounds and attempted to have him flogged without trial.

Even more telling is Paul’s confrontation with Peter in Antioch (Gal. 2:11ff). While Paul had received his call directly from the Lord, Peter had acted as his mentor in some fashion (Gal. 1:18) [3]. What is remarkable is not only that Paul had the audacity to confront Peter publicly (Peter was the preeminent apostle in the early church and one of the inner circle of three that accompanied Jesus during his earthly ministry) but he did it without a private meeting first. (Horrors—he did not follow Jesus’ teaching in Matt 18:15ff). When the truth of the Gospel was at stake normal protocol did not apply!

· This brings us to the rule of conscience. Keeping rules is a much easier way to live one’s life than being informed by a conscience. Rule keeping does not call for moral acumen and judgment. One just has to know the appropriate rule/law and apply it in a given situation. Conscience is a complex part of our being. It is that aspect of our being which serves as our moral compass, but it does not come from the factory “pre-programmed.” We might say that we are hard-wired for moral judgment; the software is slowly programmed over the years of our childhood. The context in which our conscience is programmed makes all the difference in the world. Is that context one of love, condemnation, or conditional acceptance? As has been noted:

. . . where the inevitable demands in child training are involved without first establishing a relationship of trust, moral training becomes a punitive, fear-ridden, process in which “goodness” is reduced to the avoidance of evil rather than the attainment of positive virtue. The child feels he must earn parental affection through external righteousness in this context of conditional love. His conscience then becomes negative, inflexible, and unreflective and his sense of guilt an unhealthy one. This is the conscience of the
moralists who “tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law” (Matt 23:23). Just as acceptance of the positional doctrines frees the Christian to fellowship with Christ and these doctrines mature him, so the experience of trust prior to the invoking of demand lays a foundation of grace under moral instruction which frees the child to grow morally and spiritually. What is taught is important. The emotional climate in which it is taught is equally important. Either it is infused with the spirit of Christ or the Spirit of the Pharisee. Neglect of either right content or right spirit in moral instruction is detrimental. (ZPBE, s.v conscience)

Conscience forms a vital part of the Christian’s spiritual life. In the vision of the Apostle Paul conscience plays a supreme place, more important than law itself. We find that to violate one’s conscience is a supremely serious affair (even if one’s conscience has qualms about things that are objectively permissible), and to induce another to violate his conscience even more serious. We are above all called upon to do what we think is right, and under no conditions are we to violate our conscience even if told to do so by someone we respect as a spiritually mature individual or a spiritual authority. To follow the example or instruction of a more mature believer or spiritual authority when we are not convinced of the rightness of the action brings upon us condemnation. In the words of Paul it leads us to “destroy ourselves.” (1 Cor 8:11) (Time does not permit me to develop this further but read both Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8. Note here how the contemporary church has inverted the definitions of weak and strong!)

· The issue of legalism: As noted above the teaching of obedience to spiritual authority leads naturally (and I do not think that it is too much to say) inevitably to legalism. Paul Morris, Ph.D. a pastor and theologian and one of the co-workers with Chuck Colson in the early days of Prison Fellowship has written a magnificent article entitled “Legalism—the original sin?” (http://reform-network.net/?p=1462) What follows are excerpts from that article:

In the rabbinical teachings, it is called the Mishna, the first section of the Talmud, and sets forth early oral interpretations of the Scriptures compiled about 200 A.D. If Judaism has turned the interpretation of Scripture into a prodigious legal elaboration of its rules and sanctions, we Christians have turned it into an art form. We have made legalism the primordial philosophy of the practice of faith. This leads us to this definition of legalism:

Legalism is a philosophy of religious practice wherein faith is expressed by adherence to a command and obedience infrastructure.

Of course, it is only attempted adherence, and it is more sophistry than philosophy. But we define it so owing to the fact that legalism represents a point of view. A philosophical stance of perspective. That perspective is to view relationship with God through the lens of obedience. A distinctive of this view is that short of obedience, relationship is severely fractured at best and does not exist at worst.

To the extent that a believer perceives God (and his representatives: e.g., any human religious authority) as a Commander and himself as an obeyer; to that extent, he is a legalist. If the foundational structure of his faith is built on this legal paradigm, then by definition, he is a legalist. Or perhaps it would be kinder to say that his faith is suffering from the disease of legalism.
Morris takes Bill Gothard and his Institute for Basic Youth Conflicts as a prime example of the mind of the legalist.

Gothard and others like him preach faith as form; structure. People flock to it because they see such form as the “answer” to their dysfunctional lives. They have not discovered the core and foundational being of love and how it affects behavior. They have not discovered it or they do not believe it. In either case, they have succumbed to the paralyzing disease of legalism.

When religious addicts create a toxic faith system, God is lost in the process. In God’s place, rules are implemented that serve only to further the empire of religious addiction. As new people come into the toxic faith system, they are indoctrinated into the rules rather than strengthened in a relationship with God. The rules reinforce addiction, not faith. Addiction leads to conformity to a predictable pattern of behavior, often blocking faithful following of God. It is hard for these toxic faith practitioners to realize that Christ put down the rigid, legalistic system of the religion of His day. They become even more dysfunctional.

It is not long before they learn that consistent application of the formulistic, sequential steps they were taught in the seminars do not work. They are far too simplistic to apply uniformly to life’s multitude of complexities. And sadly, their faith becomes so deformed and twisted by the mountains of rules, formulas and “answers,” that if it were possible, they would abandon it altogether. They drown in their mishnas.

It is appalling that the one thing Jesus said sets believers apart from non-believers is so profoundly discounted. The quintessential irony is that believers wish to become like non-believers: governed by law instead of love and grace. It is painfully obvious that if people learned to love and respect one another; if people perceived one another through the eyes of compassion; if people actually followed the “golden rule,” there would be no need for the making of laws. Plainly, there is a compelling need for civil and criminal law. But the people of God should not philosophically identify with this secular ethic. Believers should lead the way and help the spiritually impoverished to know that we are “Christians” by our love. A love demonstrated by acts of love toward them and toward our relationships with each other.

The Law has served abundantly well to demonstrate that we need the redemption that belief in the death, burial and resurrection in Jesus Christ brings. The Law has indeed brought us to Christ. Without it, we might have missed him. With it, we see how evil we are and how desperately we need his love, forgiveness and grace. In this the Law has succeeded beyond our ability to imagine.

Now having been accepted by God in this grace, the Law no longer functions as a standard by which believers are measured. When faced with a moral choice, the force of love compels us to choose right instead of wrong. But if we do not, the Law will not crush us because it has already crushed Christ. We are forgiven. We are picked up, brushed off and encouraged to go and sin no more. If we do, we are picked up again and told the same thing. And again. And again, ad infinitum.
Relaxing with Depravity:

St. Francis of Assisi [this is an incorrect attribution—it is from the “Serenity Prayer” written by Reinhold Niebuhr] was prayed, “Lord grant that I may accept the things I cannot change . . .” Acceptance of reality may seem the obvious and logical thing to do. Yet why is it so difficult? Why should Francis pray such a prayer?

That we are a sinful people, that I am a sinful man is a fait accompli – an established fact. Francis Schaeffer observes: “In the area of morality, . . . man cannot escape the fact of the motions of a true right and wrong in himself; not just a sociological or hedonistic morality, but true morality, true right and true wrong. And yet beginning with himself he cannot bring forth absolute standards and cannot even keep the poor relative ones he has set up. Thus in the area of morality, as in rationality, trying to be what he is not, as he was made to be in relationship to God, he is crushed and damned by what he is.”

Why do we as believers “try to be what we are not?” Why do we struggle? Why do we fight this fight? It is a lost cause. We will never win it. We cannot be anything other than what we are. If that is true, then we must accept it if we are ever going to transcend it. Paul the apostle observed, “By the grace of God, I am what I am.” In this remark he was not boasting of his person or position. He was not boasting at all for it follows upon these words, “For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” This man who could never do what he wanted to do and often did what he did not want to do came to rest only in his relationship with Christ. He learned this, ostensibly from God. He told the Corinthian believers of his struggle:

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

We will not debate the identity of Paul’s thorn, but we can describe it: It was evil! He perceived its origin as coming from Satan. Three times he pleaded with God to remove this evil thing. Three times he was refused. “My grace is sufficient,” said the Father. “You must learn to relax in my grace, Paul.” is the message behind these words. The apostle was no different than any of the rest of us. He too, was an evil man. When faced with a moral choice, out of love for his Savior he chose right — most of the time — perhaps. But there were times he chose wrong. There were times in which the beloved apostle was a jerk. Does that surprise us? It shouldn’t. It should comfort the rest of us jerks. The benefits of such rest become obvious: “For when I am weak, then I am strong.” With convincing erudition and acumen Feuerbach notes, “But I cannot have the idea of moral perfection without at the same time being conscious of it as a law for me. Moral perfection depends, at least for the moral consciousness, not on the nature, but on the will — it is a perfection of will, perfect will. I cannot conceive perfect will, the will which is in unison with law, which is itself law, without at the same time regarding it as an object of will, i.e., as an obligation for myself. The conception of the morally perfect being is no merely theoretical, inert, conception, but a practical one, calling me to action, to
imitation, throwing me into strife, into disunion with myself; for while it proclaims to me what I ought to be, it also tells me to my face, without any flattery, what I am not.”

We are indeed, what we are — and that by the grace of God. We will never be any different because of our weak attempts to observe perfect standards. If a choice is to be made between Law and Love, we must choose Love. That is what Jesus did repeatedly. We can only do what sinful people do who in some measure allow the Holy Spirit to empower them.

“We can say personality is shown by that which thinks, acts, and feels. Let us think of acting. Here is will and action — but everything cuts across my will. I would do a certain thing, but I cannot put my will into infinite action, unlimited action. Even in the small area of a painter’s canvas, I cannot do it. I cannot have an unlimited action in the smallest things of life, let alone the largest. And so if I am demanding infinite freedom, whether it is in the whole of life, or in a small area of life, I cannot have it; I cannot be God in action and practice. So again I fall to the earth, crushed with natural tensions in myself, and I lie there like a butterfly that someone has touched, with all the lovely things gone from its wings.”

To learn to relax in grace means to release the burden of responsibility in keeping the Law to God. What are God’s expectations of us? God demands perfection. We cannot meet that demand. That is why Christ died. Only in Christ are we made perfect. God expects us to sin. “He knows our frame, that we are but dust.” notes the psalmist. God is relaxed with the fact that we are sinful because he has cared for it in the death of his Son. There is nothing left for us to do but to understand this basic truth from the Old Testament:

He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. “When a frightened or injured child gives himself over to his mother, comes to her and is wrapped in her loving arms, he possesses greater security than he will ever know as an adult. There may be a very ferocious storm and gale-like winds pounding against the walls of the house, lightning turning the sky to moments of fire and thunder shaking every bone in his body, but the child will not fear. He is safe, he is secure. He has surrendered himself to his loving mother and places all his confidence and trust in her.” — Fr. Franklyn McAfee.

For whatever the terrible thorns or storms in our lives, we too will find great rest and comfort in the loving acceptance and forgiveness from the One to whom we surrender ourselves.

Conclusion

I want to wind this up by saying that while I find Bevere’s position as taken particularly in the early portion of Under Cover utterly problematic on many levels, and truly dangerous to the spiritual health of the church, in the latter part of the book he tries to qualify some of the positions he has taken early in the book. The problem I see is the qualifications, which are well stated and carefully articulated, cut against the larger broad brush strokes that he has painted from the beginning.

As I said earlier, much of what he says is good. But the framework he uses is one that is the cyanide in the Kool-Aid. While he may not go down this path himself, working out the
implicit presuppositions of his teaching, I don’t have to be a prophet to foresee that his followers will. And when they do they will unleash a new torrent of spiritual abuse that effectively undermines the freedom produced by the gospel and enslaves God’s children in chains of bondage. In so doing they will come under the same curse that Paul pronounced upon those who were adding to the gospel Paul proclaimed to the Galatian church.

[1] “The Christian must not uncritically accept—or reject—spiritual teaching but must be careful in all matters to distinguish the good and hold on to it. He will thus avoid ‘evil in any form’ (Phillips).” NIV Bible Commentary on 1 Thess 5:20-21, Pradis Edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1994).

[2] Diotrephes appears to be an influential person (perhaps the leader) in a local church known to Gaius, but to which Gaius himself does not belong. The description of Diotrephes as one who loves to be first acknowledge the written communication mentioned by the author at the beginning of v. 9 (and thus did not recognize the author’s apostolic authority), and furthermore (v. 10) refuses to show any hospitality to the travelling missionaries (welcome the brothers) already mentioned by the author. It has been suggested that the description “loves to be first” only indicates that Diotrephes sought prominence or position in this church, and had not yet attained any real authority. But his actions here suggest otherwise: He is able to refuse or ignore the author’s previous written instructions (v. 9), and he is able to have other people put out of the church for showing hospitality to the travelling missionaries (v. 10) suggests he is arrogant, and his behavior displays this: He refuses to