

Scripturally Grounded Disciples of Christ not Circle Makers  
By: Mike West

The book, *The Circle Maker* by Mark Batterson is making its rounds right now in many churches. I became aware of it, when my pastor preached a sermon based upon it and then promptly recommended that the entire congregation read the book. I have yet to read the entire text. However, the little I have read and some preliminary research has revealed troubling things about the text and author and certainly raises the question about whether it is appropriate for leaders, and pastors in church to teach from and recommend this text to the church.

**Mark Batterson**

A bit of background research on Mark Batterson suggests that he has ties to the Emergent Church and Seeker Sensitive church movements. These ties neither automatically disqualify Mr. Batterson from speaking about theological issues nor mean the positions outlined in this book are false. Even Emergent Church/Seeker Sensitive supporters and leaders can hold or advocate valid positions. To simply reject Batterson's positions simply because he has ties to a particular movement that is historically heterodox would commit a logical fallacy. That is not what is being suggested here. However ties to such movements, given their extreme unorthodox theological positions such as spiritualism, the nature of truth, Christology, hamartiology, soteriology, heaven, hell, the nature of scripture, the exclusivity of Christianity and a number of other areas of systematic theology, require that the writings of individuals with ties to these movements must be closely scrutinized to ensure that the heterodoxy of those movements are not contained within writings that are studied, taught, and used in preaching in the church. One merely has to go to the first page of *The Circle Maker* text to see the presence of eastern mysticism and spiritualism in the form of Honi the circle maker. Eastern Mysticism is not consistent with orthodox

Christianity and using such a mystic as an example of a proper prayer warrior is confusing to the body at best and at worst could be deemed to be an endorsement of unscriptural theology and a religious system that stands in stark contrast to orthodox Christianity.

### **Honi-The Legend**

The book begins with Honi's story. The text points out that God has not spoken through a prophet for almost 400 hundred years. The land is suffering from drought, and thus Honi, the prophet draws a circle around himself and affirms that he will not leave the circle until God makes it rain. Honi raises his hands and in what appears to be a type of prayer, simply calls down rain from heaven. On first, reading one may not see much wrong with this story. After all isn't the Bible full of prophets who manifested supernatural powers and did amazing things? Why is this a problem? The problem is that the entire story is a legend. It is not true. Honi is found nowhere in the canonized scripture. It is true that there was a 400 hundred year gap between the last Old Testament prophet and John the Baptist who was the forerunner to Christ. However, there was no Honi in between. In fact many Old Testament scholars call John the Baptist the last Old Testament prophet. If a person does not know their scriptures, does not check them, or simply takes the word of the teacher or leader who is teaching from and/ or recommending the book, they could come away with the idea that Honi was a real prophet of God who was between the last Old Testament prophet and John the Baptist. It is simply a pathway for confusion and error to creep into the body of believers.

We also need to look at the behavior of Honi in this story. He is referred to as a prophet. When one looks at the history of God's prophets, they behaved in a certain manner. They were God's servants. They waited for the Lord to tell them what to do and relayed what the Lord told

them to relay. One merely has to look at the corpus of scripture to see this obvious fact. Prophets of God did not arbitrarily act of their own accord. They waited to be instructed by God, and then they acted as instructed. One merely has to read scripture's accounts of the prophets to see phrases such as, "Thus says the Lord" to see this fact. Even Elijah waited for instruction from the Lord before acting or speaking as God's prophet. Why? Because God acted through the prophets for certain reasons and purposes. The prophets were God's chosen manner in which to bring about certain events or to teach His people certain things. However, this does not seem to be the case for Honi the circle maker. God did not tell Honi to draw a circle around himself, gather the people around, and then call down rain. Instead Honi acted in an arbitrary fashion, choosing on his own to draw a circle around himself, telling God he would not leave the circle until he sent rain, and then calling down that rain from heaven. Honi is not acting like a prophet of God. He is acting like he is a little god who by entering his circle, demanding God comply, and saying a few words can conjure up supernatural power. Notice God did not tell him to do any of this. He just did it, and thus the rain came by his power and for his purpose and not by God's power and for His purpose. This is more consistent with eastern mysticism and spiritualism rather than being consistent with the orthodox Christianity. Honi's actions are certainly not consistent with prophets of Christianity, and using his example distorts the church's understanding of what the Old Testament prophets did, why they did what they did, and attitude of submission that was present when they did what they did.

### **The Revolutionized Prayer Defense**

When those who support the use and teaching of this text in the church are confronted with objections about such, the response I have heard is, "Well I do not see anything wrong with the text and even if there is, it has revolutionized the prayer life of Batterson's congregation, and

it is doing the same for other congregations too.” Supporters maintain that the story is a metaphor for a new type of prayer, and Batterson is correct in his approach. Thus, we should pray big prayers, do so continually, and draw circles around those things about which we need to pray. They assert, “People are doing this, and they are now praying and even praying differently.” However, those who make such claims are simply begging the question because they fail to answer the question, “What is the nature of such prayer?” The inference by those who hold this position seems to be if it gets folks to pray, pray more, or pray differently, then such is a good thing and no one can reasonably argue with that. The answer is God’s inerrant and infallible word can challenge that notion if the nature of such prayer is inconsistent with the biblical manner in which prayer is to be done. Christians need to pray and pray ceaselessly. Christians need to pray big prayers. We need to expect answers to our prayers. Many times Christians pray for something once, and the answer does not come and so we quit praying about it. All Christians need work in the area of prayer. However, we do not need the legend of Honi to teach us about prayer. We have God’s word and it contains example after example of how to pray and the nature of prayer. The church should be concerned with the nature of how folks are praying and should be a source of proper, scripturally grounded instruction of such. Instruction concerning the nature of praying does not mean that the church provides specific words that a person must use when praying. The nature of prayer is much deeper than that. However, there is a biblical nature of prayer. Proper biblical prayer is prayer that is done with a heart of submission. Should we take our needs, wants, desires, dreams, and everything about our lives to the Father in prayer? Absolutely! He knows them already. However, we should do it submissively. It should be done in a manner that says, “thy will be done and not my will be done.” Dr. Gary Habermas in his book, *Why is God Ignoring Me*, points out that prayer is a

“conditional exercise.”<sup>1</sup> He points out that if we are to have our prayers answered we must approach it with a confessing heart, be obedient, pray in Jesus’ name, have faith that God will answer, and pray according to God’s will.<sup>2</sup> In Matthew 26: 36-42, Mark 14: 32-42 and Luke 22: 39-46, Jesus demonstrated this submission. While he was in the garden prior to his arrest, He was troubled, knowing what was coming. He so wanted to avoid the agony of and isolation from the Father that he was to experience at Calvary. In his anguish, He cries out in prayer to the Father. Yet He says, “not my will, but your will be done.” Jesus repeatedly submitted to the Father’s will in life and in His prayers to God. As Christians we subscribe to the notion of Sola Scriptura, which means that the Bible is the final authority on that about which it speaks. The doctrine does not mean that we cannot use other books and resources as we teach and preach the gospel, however when scripture speaks on a subject, it has the final say. Scripture is clear about how we are to pray. It is the standard upon which we are to operate. When we pray we are to seek first the Father’s will for our lives. It is in this submission, that we will receive the desires of our hearts because in that submission, God’s will for our life becomes our will as well. Those who make the claim that this text, built on the example of Honi, has revolutionized the prayer life of many people must understand that revolutionizing something can also be detrimental. Simply getting people to pray, pray more, or to pray differently is not a better situation if such prayer is done in an unbiblical manner. That assertion does not logically or evidentially follow and that position is a direct challenge to the authority of scripture on the topic and nature of prayer. This is not what the church is after, and if we pay attention to scripture, unbiblical prayer is not what God desires either, and such will not be answered by God. The prayer of Honi is not of a biblical nature, and that is the danger of introducing this text and holding Honi up as an

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<sup>1</sup> Gary R. Habermas, *Why Is God Ignoring Me: What to do When It Feels Like He’s Giving You the Silent Treatment* (Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers), 79.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 80-85.

example. The use of a metaphor should be helpful and should not lead the church to embrace a model of prayer that is inconsistent with orthodoxy. However, embracing the metaphor of Honi does just that. As Honi's prayer and its problematic nature are the foundation upon which the entire text is built, the question concerning whether this is a text that should be taught and embraced by church pastors, leaders, and members of the body of Christ is raised again. Paul instructs us in Titus 2:1 to "teach sound doctrine." The apostle John in 1 John 4:1 stresses that we should, "test the spirits." Scripture also tells us that "false prophets" and "destructive heresies" will come into the church (2 Peter 2:1; Matthew 24:11; Mark 13: 22,23). In Acts 20, Paul warns the leaders of the church in Ephesus to "keep watch over the flock" because "savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock." He stresses that, "even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them." The question for all Christians, churches, leaders, and pastors is have we applied these standards to this text prior to recommending and teaching it in Christ's church? Serious questions have been raised as a result of looking at the first few pages of the book. These questions require the church and its leaders to move with extreme and deliberate caution in regards to this author and book rather than give a blanket endorsement of this book. Do we have enough and have we done enough to make certain that it contains sound doctrine and it is not a destructive heresy developed by a heretical author who claims membership in Christ's universal church? The problems discussed here seem to suggest that a conclusion endorsing this text as orthodox is premature.

### **Should Christian Read The Text?**

Certainly there are enough issues in the first few pages of the book that would give Christians solid and reasonable justification for not reading the book. I hope to read the entire

book and provide an in depth analysis of its contents. If Christians decide to read the book, they should be extremely careful with it and test everything in the book against the canonized scriptures. Verify Batterson's positions. Make sure that any scripture he offers for support of his positions is exegetically and contextually correct. Think about his positions from a systematic theology perspective. Make sure there is consistency across the board theologically, historically, and evidentially. If something does not seem right or seems to be in conflict, do not just ignore it. Find out why and resolve it before moving on with your reading. Every position taken in this book should be tested to make sure that it is theologically and doctrinally sound. It should be and will be a great deal of work for Christians to read this text. However, if they are not going to do this, or do not want to do this, then I would recommend against reading this book. Whether Christians read it or not, we can and need to study the concept of biblical prayer. We can do that by reading and studying the scriptures that teach about prayer. From the word of God, we have many examples of the pleasure of praying, what it is, why it should be done, how it should be done and the nature of it when it is done. As believers we all want to grow closer to God, to have his heart, to see with his eyes, to be and live our lives in relationship with him as the saved cherished people of God. It is by following the tenets of scripture that we will revolutionize our prayer lives and our relationship and knowledge of God not as circle makers, but as scripturally grounded disciples of Christ who pray with the heart and in the manner Christ intended.