

The Church of Wells

By Dylan McCabe

Founders: Sean Morris, Jake Gardner, and Ryan Ringnald

Founding Date: 2009

Publications: *The Condescension of God* by Sean Morris

Organizational Structure: Elder led group. No association with traditional denominations.

BACKGROUND

The Church of Wells was founded in Arlington Texas. In 2009 a small group of Christians banded together to form a group devoted to Christ. They strove to imitate the Christianity displayed in the book of Acts. Three elders lead the group, and each of them is in his twenties. All three men grew up as middle class Americans. Sean Morris, the more public figure, was raised in a nominally Christian home. Little is know about Jake Gardner; and Ryan Ringnald, claims to have been a very religious person before converting to Christianity.

The group would pass under the radar of church history if not for a single tragedy. The church neglected to take a sick baby to the hospital, and it died. Rather than administering proper medical care, they prayed over the baby for several days. They claimed it would have been a lack of faith to do anything else.¹ In 2013, a member of the church named Catherine Grove left her family to join the church. The story was aired on several national news stations, including CNN.² The Grove family claimed the group held Catherine against her will; however, despite the church's response Catherine remains out of contact, hidden within the walls of this communal style group.

THREE ELDERS

Sean, one of the three elders, grew up in a middleclass household. His father, a successful businessman in the oil industry, carried the family around the globe. Sean spent half of his life in the US and half in other countries. When recalling his childhood and spiritual upbringing he states; "Growing up, I never even heard or understood the word repentance until I was a senior in high school, and it was just a few months before I was saved. According to my memory, I never heard the phrase 'you must be born again' (John 3:3)."³

Sean admits that before his conversion to Christ he was a sinner in desperate need of salvation. "My life, like all others that I was close to, was full of sexual immorality, pornography, partying, drunkenness, illegal activity, violence, sports fame, athletic perfection, bragging, self-exaltation, self-seeking, gossip, slander, betrayal, lying, deceit..."⁴ But everything changed for Sean the beginning of his senior year of high school (2004). In a mandatory religion class Sean's teacher began reading the Lord's Prayer. According to Sean, the Holy Spirit used this experience to give him a great anxiety about the Word of God. Sean picked up his Bible, which was on the floor, and began reading Romans chapter one. Sean realized the passage, which describes the state of every lost sinner before God, described him.⁵ He claims he was saved eight months later.

Sean does not describe how he was saved, but he asserts that he was finally "born again." Family members and friends saw a remarkable change in him, and he was never the same. Though not stated on the web site, his cousin, Cory McLaughlin, who was also a devout Christian, largely influenced Sean. Cory is a professional artist known for stunning murals and oil paintings, he moved away from Houston to join the group.

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Ryan Ringnald is also one of the three elders. Ryan's past was quite different than Sean's. Ryan explains that he was raised to believe in Christianity. His devotion surpassed that of his peers. "I had been persecuted for standing on my Christian convictions numerous times; I had been baptized, led Bible studies, and participated in accountability groups; I had oft lifted up my hands in emotional worship to God with tears; I had learned more than most of my peers about Scripture 'from a child'..."⁶ He explains that his devotion lacked one key element—salvation. He claims the Lord began a saving work in him in 2005. That year Ryan understood his total depravity before the God of the Bible.

From then on, he had a completely different Christian experience. "I broke before the striving of the Lord, begging him in a prayer of unadulterated brokenness, to have mercy upon my pathetic soul and the life I had ruined..."⁷ From that day forward, Ryan sought the Lord intensely, no matter what the cost. Finally, after reading the works of Charles Spurgeon and John Wesley, Ryan prayed earnestly that the Lord would save him. In the fall of 2006 God lit a flame in Ryan's soul that he states is still burning today.⁸

Jake Garner is the third elder of the Church of Wells. His testimony portion of their web site is much shorter than those of Sean and Ryan. It is quoted in full here:

"I was saved in the Spring of 2004. I look back now, year after year, and am always amazed at how God truly has made me a new creature in Christ, and how the Spirit of the Lord is changing me from glory to glory into His image. I believe Paul said it best in Galatians, 'For I through the law am dead to the law, that I might live unto God. I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me' (2:20). My life's prayer now is that God would consume me with a white-hot fervency for His glory, His Son, His word, the churches and the lost. I long to say with David, 'For the zeal of thine house hath eaten me up...' (Psalm 69:9)."⁹

DOCTRINE

Works-based Salvation: The Church of Wells asserts a merit-based salvation. Sean Morris calls this teaching the *Doctrine of Reprobation*. If you turn your back on God, He will turn His back on you. "Israel broke their agreement, so God broke His agreement. They broke their debts, which were due to God, so God being compelled by righteous justice, was innocent to revoke His. "When God's people forsake Him (Jer. 2:13, 17), then God is constrained by the edicts of justice to do likewise."¹⁰ They also assert that salvation is a process.

Eternal Security: Since the elders see salvation as a process the denial of this process gives people the false assurance of eternal security, which is another damnable teaching.¹¹ In other words, you can lose your salvation. Sean rails against Calvinism, specifically the idea of eternal security. "Oh Calvinist, will you not collapse as you read the following ways of God by condescension? They do break the boundaries of your theological system, and why? Your theology is built under the unbiblical premise that theology must be logically consistent instead of biblically consistent."¹² This doctrinal work makes a case that Calvinism is wrong and must be shunned. However, the banner of the church website has pictures of George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards, both devout Calvinists.¹³ The church also promotes Charles Spurgeon's daily devotion, *Morning and Evening*.¹⁴ There seems to be a disconnect with what is taught and what is promoted to the public.

Hyper-focused on fruit bearing: Even when Sean expounds on the *Condescension of God*, his teaching turns to bearing fruit. "God's condescension affects God's will, word, counsel, and therefore, His promises, which then do affect the doctrine of eternal security."¹⁵ The *Condescension of God* shows that God is sovereign. God's ways are higher than man's ways. Sean uses this teaching to explain how amazing it is that a holy God who created all things would relate to sinful man. Yet the doctrine then turns a focus on how the believer should then bear fruit in keeping with salvation.

Like Israel in the Old Testament, our relationship with God depends on His promises; and His promises are realized when we bear the fruit of faithfulness. Ultimately: no fruit, no eternal security. Sean uses the examples of Jeremiah, Joshua, Jacob, and Josiah to show that God can select someone for His purposes, forgive their sins, and then damn them to hell. Sean concludes that Calvin's idea of eternal security is from the devil. "This misappropriation of the doctrine of election

has become a complex snare of the devil that seduces God's people into an unbiblical confidence of salvation, a supposing that God accepts them while in a state of unrepentance."¹⁶

The Hatred of God: The Church of Wells asserts a doctrine called the *Hatred of God*. Sean teaches that God hates sinners. He explained the purpose of his sermon, stating; "This Sermon is an attempt to show, justify, and exalt the hatred of God to compel men to the re-creating love of God. Listen and understand the God of the Bible against that of cultural unbiblical Christianity."¹⁷ The church affirms that God's hatred toward sinners must precede an understanding of His love.

Separation from others: Members of the Church of Wells separate themselves from family, friends, and worldly Christians. This practice has left many families, like the Groves, in distress. When someone joins the church, they all but disappear. The doctrine of separation fuels this behavior. The church's manifesto states, "The churches are so full of the world that the truly saved are pressed out of the fold, and scattered upon the hills as sheep without a shepherd."¹⁸

The Manifesto goes on to explain that a truly devout Christian cannot abide with unbelievers or sinful believers. Thus, Church members only associate with themselves. Anyone, family or friend, who poses a threat to complete devotion to Christ must be shunned: "Therefore when there is ANYTHING that threatens to discontinue fellowship with HIM it is hatefully avoided at any cost!"¹⁹ This teaching, the *Doctrine of Judgment*, explains why members of the church separate themselves from their families. Simply put, their families are leavened by worldliness, and a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough.

Familial Judgment: Sean also explains that devotion to Christ often means hating your family.²⁰ Many people who have associated with the church accuse them of being infatuated with judgment. Sean responded with an eleven-chapter defense. In this document, he asserts that Christ brings division to families. He admits, "All they see is relentless and UNNECESSARY division and they blame us."²¹

Sean affirms that this is not his fault. "On the contrary, we blame Christ because the scripture speaketh²² expressly, 'So there was a division among the people because of HIM' (John 7:43)."²³ Sean goes on to conclude that the inevitable consequence to following Christ is division with others, especially family. He reiterates, "We know that Christ purposed to bring the sword and division, but in the terms of Micah 7:6 it is said to be a salvation through the dishonoring of your father rather than the submissive honoring of him."²⁴

Other Practices: The Church of Wells promotes other extreme practices. They believe in aggressive, open air preaching. While open air preaching is indeed biblical, the church's kind is harsh and overtly confrontational. The group reads the King James Bible only and holds this translation as the only word of God. They speak partly in Elizabethan English to one another, as if the whole world read the King James Bible. Ex-members of the church reveal disturbing details of conformity in speech and attire, testifying about the leadership's obsession with control. One member reports living in constant fear of God and how he cut ties with family to "seek the Lord."²⁵

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

Salvation: Salvation is obtained by faith through grace and not of works (Eph. 2:8-9).

Eternal Security: The Bible is replete with Scriptures that teach eternal security.²⁶ Jesus clearly stated that eternal life comes through Him and those who receive it do not come into judgment (John 5:24). Salvation is a gift (John 3:16; Eph. 2:8-9) and the condition is faith (John 1:12, 3:16, 5:24; Acts 16:31; Rom. 4:3, 5:1). Jesus Christ is the author and finisher of the believers' salvation (Jonah 2:9; 2 Tim. 2:13; Eph. 1:4; Heb. 10:14; Rom. 11:29).

Bearing Fruit: Every true Christian will produce fruit (Gal. 5:22-23; Eph. 5:9; Matt. 3:8). Without any evidence of the Spirit's indwelling, no one should believe they have been born again (Rom. 8:9). However, the church's hyper-focus on fruit bearing flows from their belief that you can lose your salvation. Additionally, the church paints a picture of devout Christianity that lacks biblical honesty.

God consistently calls imperfect people to do great things. And they grow into godliness along the way. Noah got drunk after surviving the flood (Gen. 9:20-22), Abraham lied repeatedly (Gen. 20:1-2, 26:7), and Moses' defiance of God kept him out of the Promised Land (Num. 20:8-12). Samson's life reveals a violent womanizer (Judg. 14-16). King David had an affair and murdered his

lover's husband (2 Sam. 11). Elijah had suicidal thoughts (1 King. 19), apostles James and John wanted positional power over others (Matt. 20:21), and Peter denied Christ three times (Matt. 26:69-75). The list goes on. God calls people not to perfection but to perseverance.

The Hatred of God: A full view of God allows one to see the wrath of God, as well as, His love and mercy. When the Pharisees and scribes asked Jesus about the greatest command, He responded with one powerful phrase—love God and love your neighbor (Matt. 22:40). Jesus pointed not to judgment, hate, purity, passion, or any other form of godliness. He pointed to the divine virtue—love (1 John 4:7-8).

Separation from others: The Church of Wells points to several places in Scripture to justify this behavior. Whether cutting ties with family to “seek the Lord” or cutting ties with Christians, the group promotes a separatist mindset. Truly, the Bible speaks of the separation for sinful activity (Isa. 52:11; 2 Cor. 6:17). Yet, like other doctrines the church promotes, they emphasize this one to the injury of others. In the context 2 Corinthians 6 Paul admonished believers to live godly lives and have “separate” behavior from the worldly culture around them. However, Paul did not tell them to withdraw from unbelievers or worldly Christians.

Rather, he taught them a form of holiness in behavior, not location. Moreover, Scripture teaches that believers should seek to be peacemakers with all men (Rom. 12:18). Believers should strive for harmony, unity, and the building up of one another (Phil. 4:25; Eph. 4:31; John 17:23). Also, believers should bear with one another and help one another in our spiritual lives; and if a brother is entangled in sin, those who are spiritual should seek to restore him with gentleness (Gal. 6:1-2). While the Church of Wells focuses on sin, Christ focused on love and unity.

There are cases that exist in which a rebellious person must be asked to leave fellowship for a time; however, the goal is restoration back into the group. Church of Wells leaders and members are known for telling others they are going to hell. They promote separation from those less devoted than themselves. Yet, Christ was known for preaching faith in God and everlasting life.

The Church of Wells is riddled with lop-sided theology; and bad theology leads to bad practice—in this case the death of a baby. Also, members of the church cut ties with family and friends to live a devoted life to Christ; but before doing so they preach to them, Christian and unbeliever alike, that they stand in danger of God's judgment. Moreover, the group's leadership preaches a Christ who does not fully save. Like the Judaizers of the apostle Paul's day, Sean Morris preaches strict adherence to the laws Scripture for assurance of salvation; and like the Pharisees Jesus rebuked, this church places legalistic burdens on people so heavy, no one can carry them. The danger? Fear, an obsession with holiness, mixed with a lifestyle of division that can transform a devout group of young believers into a harmful religion.

Notes

¹ www.thechurchofwells.com/faith-pursley-memorial-service.html (accessed December 13, 2013)

² www.ketknbc.com/news/live-on-cnn-headline-news-ketk-covers-the-church-o (accessed December 13, 2013)

³ www.thechurchofwells.com/sean-morris.html (accessed December 13, 2013)

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ www.thechurchofwells.com/ryan-ringnald.html (accessed December 13, 2013)

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ www.thechurchofwells.com/elders.html (accessed December 13, 2013)

¹⁰ www.thecondescensionofgod.com/13---the-doctrine-of-reprobation.html (accessed December 13, 2013)

¹¹ www.thechurchofwells.com/our-manifesto.html (accessed December 13, 2013)

¹² www.thecondescensionofgod.com/god-in-the-ways-of-man.html (accessed December 13, 2013)

¹³ www.thechurchofwells.com (accessed December 13, 2013)

¹⁴ www.thechurchofwells.com/spurgeons-daily-devotional.html (accessed December 13, 2013)

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ <http://www.thecondescensionofgod.com/14---the-damnable-abuse--misapplication-of-sovereign-election.html> (accessed December 13, 2013)

¹⁷ <http://www.thechurchofwells.com/you-must-hate-your-life-and-lose-your-life-to-save-your-life.html> (accessed December 13, 2013)

¹⁸ <http://www.thechurchofwells.com/our-manifesto.html> (accessed December 13, 2013)

¹⁹ <http://www.thechurchofwells.com/judgment-10.html> (accessed December 13, 2013)

²⁰

http://www.thechurchofwells.com/files/theme/Hatred_And_Spiritual_Murder.mp3 (accessed December 13, 2013)

²¹ <http://www.thechurchofwells.com/judgment-6.html> (accessed December 13, 2013)

²² The Church of Wells members speak with an Elizabethan English flare. They use words such as “thou” and “speaketh” etc., when speaking to one another.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ <http://www.thechurchofwells.com/judgment-6.html> (accessed December 13, 2013)

²⁵ <http://www.ketknbc.com/news/exclusive-interview-with-former-church-of-wells-me> (accessed December 13, 2013)

²⁶ John 3:18, 5:24, 6:37, 39-40, 10:27, 17:9-24; Rom. 4:5-6, 8:29-30, 33, 35-39; 11:29; 2 Cor. 5:5-6; Eph. 1:4-5, 2:8-9; Phil. 1:6, 4:3; Heb. 10:14; Rev. 3:5.



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