

FREEDOM'S RING

"Proclaim liberty throughout the land" (Lev. 25:10)

Cecil & Lea Hook

10905 SW Mira Ct, Tigard, OR 97223-3838

503-624-5760; <hookc@teleport.com> <Cecil@freedomring.org> <<http://www.freedomring.org>>

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Our Identity

Let me invite each of you to the reunion of my mother's family next June. There will be quite a gathering of Moores including all sorts of distant cousins, many of whom I have never met.

Not interested? I didn't think you would be. You do not identify with any of that family, except for some acquaintance with Lea and me. Relationships give us a feeling of identity even though we do not even know all the kinfolk. We can understand why a woman may continue to wear her maiden name along with that of her husband rather than give up her former identity. We have no objection to this, but how does it play in the matter of our religious identity?

The subject of my effort at feeding the flock one Sunday morning several years ago is forgotten. No doubt, it was one of my usual platitudinous preachments. As I stood in the vestibule after the dismissal, a young visitor came by, and without the customary handshake, protested disdainfully, "What you had to say could have been said in the pulpit of any denomination!" He was disturbed because he did not hear a message distinctive to the Church of Christ.

To the best of my recollection, he did not wait for a response, and I gave him none. Being slow-witted sometimes has been in my favor.

In years past many preachers made great use of the radio, and I liked to listen to them. One reason for my listening was to see if I could identify which church the speaker represented. Usually, it did not take long to make the right guess, especially for my brothers in the Church of Christ. We had developed so many key terms, points of emphasis, and mannerisms of speech that I could usually detect that it was "one of us" in a minute or two. Sometimes even the tone of voice betrayed the identity of the speaker. It seemed that no preacher of my persuasion would dare to deliver a message that would not readily identify him with the Church of Christ. He did not speak long without mentioning the right name for the church, the necessity of being in Christ's church which was us, the need of communion on each first day of the week and only on that day, and the absolute prohibition of the use of instruments of music in worship. These were points of identity which readily distinguished us from other groups. As a fowl or beast is able to identify others of its kind by their outcries, so we could confidently identify our partisan kind.

At hand is a four-page mailout concerning marriage, divorce, and remarriage. I do not see the name of a church sponsoring it. I see some expressions like *living in adultery*, *lived in fornication*, *adulterous marriage*, *guilty party*, *alien sinner*, *erring child of God* (as though there is any other kind), *cessation of all sin in our lives before acquittal* (as though that were possible), *silence of the scriptures*, and *instrumental music in worship*. Would you hazard a guess as to what group the writers are identified with?

The sad part of the story is that we have too often used doctrines and practices rather than Christian discipleship and fruits of the Spirit as marks of identity. We have stressed our differences instead of looking for commonality, seeking to distinguish ourselves *from* rather than to identify *with* others.

We proclaimed those partisan lessons and distributed those tracts on "Why I Am A Member of the Church of Christ" in efforts to convince people of our correct doctrinal and practical distinction. Thus we converted people to the Church of Christ with less emphasis on conversion to Christ.

In an editorial in his later years, Reuel Lemmons stamped a startling truth on my mind. His exact words were not kept, but his general statement was that *any teaching or practice that distinguishes a group from all others is suspect*.

Is that an unfair assessment? You think so? Then let me ask you a question or two. Think of the unnumbered multitude of intelligent, scholarly, zealous, and devout men through the centuries who gave themselves humbly to intense study to learn the will of God. Have we finally stumbled upon vital truth, or a special assortment of truths, that they were unable to find? Were they all too dishonest, prejudiced, or proud to accept the very truth they dedicated themselves to find? Or have the leaders of various groups over-valued their own insights and points of emphasis as though they had new revelations from God? Our own "Church of Christ positions" were not all hammered out by the most humble, scholarly, and non-judgmental men. So why should we avoid honest re-examination of our identifying marks---except that we fear loss of identity?

Through my reexamination, as I have recorded in my books, I am convinced that our distinctive teachings and practices are not only suspect, but they are divisive when we seek to bind them on others and use them as the standard of truth by which we judge all other disciples. They should be marks of identification no longer.

While I am applying this criterion to us, it also applies to any and all other religious groups. Yet for some strange reason ☺ we can agree that it applies to others more than to ourselves.

In efforts to convince others that we are just the universal church of Christ without any denominational identity, we explain that Christ's church has no distinguishing name. We point out that it is referred to in the scriptures as *the church*, *the church of God*, *the church of the firstborn*, *the household of faith*, *the kingdom of God*, etc. But then all the king's horses and all the king's men could not get one of our congregations to put *kingdom of God* on its sign, *church of God* on its letterhead, or *household of faith* for its telephone listing. Those terms do not give our distinct identity. Our claims prove to be empty talk.

Once I put a notice in our bulletin that a certain family had been with the church of God in a neighboring city and now wished to be a part of our congregation. It was no surprise that I

was reprimanded by an elder. Too confusing! People might think that we accepted people from the Church of God!

Several years ago, I made a supply of *Generic Christian* bumper stickers. I felt sure that our “undenominational” people would be eager to buy them. Don’t we claim to be “no brand name” Christians---just Christians only, not some kind of Christians? The sticker has not been a best seller! I have seen more stickers urging *Attend The Church of Christ* and *The Churches of Christ Salute You!* Why? Some people don’t like bumper stickers, and some may think *generic* denotes inferiority. But I think the real reason is because *generic Christian* does not identify one with a certain church. Our partisan loyalty to a church is similar to our loyalty to our home town, alma mater, football team, or political party. People want that distinctive identity, so they have no T-shirts with *Support Generic Football!*

The sectarian label enables us to identify others of our kind without our having to look at the persons and to shun those whom we refuse to recognize as disciples without having to consider the individuals. They make us more comfortable with the sins of judgmentalism and sectarian spirit within us. Judging others by their labels relieves the fear of associating with others who may be considered “brothers in error.”

Stripping off the distinctive label may cause one to feel like a wanderer among strangers. Visiting the church on the next block may make you feel like an alien for you do not know its history, its preachers, its universities, etc. But some of us have met with a refreshing surprise. Many of us have attended Bible Study Fellowship, an international, non-denominational study of the Bible, and others are being involved with Promise Keepers. In these associations, all identify with God in Christ and thereby identify with one another. It is amazingly refreshing to be able to associate with people from all churches without anyone mentioning church identity. They are all just Christians joining hands. Church distinctions fade out. We can believe Thomas and Alexander Campbell, Barton Stone, and other of our pioneers would have been thrilled to participate in such activities. And I am confident that the Father is pleased to see those whom he has brought into his fellowship join together in such united promotion of his cause.

How wonderful it is that Max Lucado, who works with the Oak Hills Church of Christ in San Antonio, in his far-reaching *Upwords* radio outreach ministers under the banner of Christ rather than the church. It is fitting and exciting that the Baptist General Convention of Texas awarded him the 1996 Texas Baptist Communications Award!

Looking at it realistically, we know that universal dropping of identifying names is a long way off. Working in that direction, however, we can do our little part individually by recognizing disciples of different labels as children of the same Father. Outgrowing our sectarian spirit even while serving in distinctive churches, we can all cultivate an identity with all the children of our common Father and proclaim salvation through a common Savior. How great it is to have such a courageous and humble man as Max Lucado to lead in erasing party labels in this manner. Let us do likewise.

Just as I feel an identity with cousins at the Moore reunion whom I might not have met before, let us feel an identity with all who wear the name of Christ, whether we ever meet them on earth or not.

As for answering the young man who wanted a distinctive message, I should have thanked him for the compliment that I at last had been able to deliver a non-partisan discourse. [ch]

Standing On The Issues

We all have heard of the candidate for political office who was asked where he stood on a certain controversial issue. In essence, his reply was, “I have friends and supporters who stand on each side of this issue. I am always going to stand with my friends!” Of course, no politician could say anything that concisely!

“He stands for nothing” is a prejudicial slur sometimes cast against one who is lenient on the critic’s pet party issues. When dividing issues are created between two sides, partisans sometimes want to know where others stand on the issues. The person who speaks out boldly and dogmatically supporting current controversies appears to those of like mind as a stalwart defender of the faith.

In my upbringing, I was schooled in the issues of the day that we had created and over which we divided. Through much of my career as a preacher, I took my stand and reinforced those positions I espoused. It was a slow and painful process that led me to conclude that most of those ardently debated things were more contentions than convictions. So I quit standing on the issues and started walking through and over them. I haven’t stopped yet, and I am excited by the growing number of disciples who have outgrown those party-making contentions.

So much time and attention has been given to irrelevant, extraneous matters that we have often lost sight of the important things. A person’s salvation does not depend upon his ability to make hair-splitting definitions.

As ridiculous as the politician’s statement may seem at first, his answer has much merit. On certain points of debate, I may say, “I have good fellow-believers in Christ on both sides of this contention. I am going to stand with the believers!” Believers are more important than most of the things that we have made into criteria for measuring those with whom we may associate. When we make conformity to our own convictions more important than the fellowship of those disciples who fail to value them as we do, we have lost our sense of values.

Isn’t this what we should have learned from the Jerusalem conference detailed in Acts 15? The Judean disciples were contending that circumcision was necessary for salvation. This was not just an opinion, but a life-or-death conviction. After discussing the matter, the assembly of apostles, elders, and the church agreed that the Jews could circumcise but no Gentile was compelled to do so. In Jesus, “Neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation” (Gal.6:15). So why make a dividing barrier out of it or other such convictions?

In similar manner, Paul dealt with the scruples about eating foods that had been offered to idols. He declared, “Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do” (1 Cor. 8:8). There were disciples standing on each side of the *meats and days* controversy. Paul stood with the believers on both sides of it (Romans 14), defending their freedom and offering us no acceptable alternative. People are more important than issues! Let them have their own scruples and convictions, but accept the persons.

Does that mean that persons can believe nothing or just anything and be saved? No, but issues have no saving power---only Jesus has! We must believe that Jesus was the Son of God, that he died for our sins, was raised, ascended, and

will receive the faithful. Anyone who “does not abide in the doctrine of Christ (concerning Christ-ch), does not have God” (2 John 9). But disciples may have different convictions about such things as keeping days and eating food while cherishing their fellowship in Christ. The debates of the early disciples were about circumcision, food, and days. We have chosen other things to try to require in our time. The early disciples were not allowed to reject those who disagreed on them. Neither are we.

I have convictions that will not allow me to accept all the teachings and practices or the forms and functions of many other persons like the Baptists, Presbyterians, and Lutherans. But they are sincerely serving God according to their own consciences. I accept them as fellow disciples without endorsing all they believe and practice. I can say the same thing about persons in the Church of Christ! I stand with them as believers with their varying convictions, misdirections and foibles. We are on the same team.

Why can we not stand with all who seek to honor God and combat sin, at least in activities that do not relate to doctrines or practices? A few years ago a city-wide, downtown *March for Jesus* as a testimonial of faith and solidarity was promoted in New Braunfels, Texas where I lived. It was not even mentioned in our congregation. I marched with hundreds of other cheerful believers, but I saw no other person from our congregations. No, there is no “thou shalt” for such activity, but it was an opportunity. Some of our people decry those who take part in *Promise Keepers* simply because it is a participation with believers from other churches. Many years ago I joined the ministerial alliance in New Iberia, Louisiana in order to get allotted radio time free. I found that all those ministers were just as sincere as I was; each had his own convictions as I did; they accepted each other personally as disciples; and all were cautious not to offend one another. But there were so many objections by brethren that I had to withdraw. Such has been our sad story but, thank the Lord, it is changing! Let us hasten the change.

God has not died and left me on his throne to judge those who call upon him. I want to stand with Him and the multitude of his people -- always ready to defend the freedom he gave each of them. If we cannot stand together accepting each other in love, agreement on all the issues is of little profit. [ch]

Going Beyond What Is Written

When one visits my Web Site, he or she may sign my *Guest Book* there and leave a short note, if it pleases. Those greetings are appreciated. One of those recent notes caught my attention especially. A brother from North Carolina left this message:

“It’s great to have another Christian site on the Web. While you are teaching ‘Freedom’ you might also teach 1 Cor. 4:6, ‘do not go beyond what is written.’ Abihu and Nadab went beyond what was written and paid the price.” (He signed his name, but I will not use it here.)

I do not have time to give detailed answers to all letters and questions, and I have no inclination to enter into controversy with anyone. However, because my response to this note may be of wider interest, I will comment on it here with no intent to offend or embarrass. His concern is courteous and sincere.

More than half a century ago, these two references were favorites of mine for use as warnings like this brother has used them. After using them for many years, I began to look

more closely to see if they taught what I was making them say. Let me share what I found.

“Do not go beyond what is written” was a black-and-white tool to use against things I was convinced were wrong. Since I could not find written authority for instrumental music in worship, the use of candles, incense, or images in worship, sprinkling for baptism, infant baptism, church creeds, or use of special singing groups, it was clear to me that those and other *unauthorized* practices were going beyond what is written, hence sinful.

Of course, I did not apply that to the *non-authorized* division of the assembly into classes, use of individual communion glasses, collection trays, “placing membership,” church-owned property, legal incorporation of the congregation with trustees to own property, “church” weddings, indoor baptistries, paid ministers for the congregation (except for elders), singing classes, or singing with four-part harmony with a leader beating time and others patting their feet. I already accepted those things, so that made them right! I refused to do some of the things that were plainly written (authorized) like anointing the sick with oil, washing feet, greeting with a holy kiss, lifting up hands in prayer, having a female deacon, letting women pray and prophesy in the assembly when they observed proper decorum, and laying hands on appointees with fasting and prayer.

One does not have to be too smart to see that either I was inconsistent or my proof-text did not mean what I thought it meant, or both. It took me longer to admit my inconsistency that to recognize it.

What was written that they and we should not go beyond? In 1 Corinthians 1:31, Paul had quoted what “was written” in Jeremiah 9:29, “as it is written, ‘Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord.’” The divisive nature of the Corinthian congregation revealed pride and boasting among its leaders. Paul and Apollos were not leading divisions, but Paul put their names in the place of the divisive ones, stating, “I have applied all this to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brethren, that you may learn by us to live according to scripture (*not to go beyond the things which are written*-ASV; *not to think of men above that which is written* -KJV), that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.”

How could I ever have twisted that to apply to things mentioned above which I opposed? Jeremiah had nothing of that nature in mind. Neither did Paul. Read the first four chapters including this text to see that they were “thinking of men above what is written” when they in their pride boasted of wisdom and followed divisive men. Another of my proof texts bites the dust, unless I am too proud to admit it, thus “going beyond the scriptures” by being puffed up by pride like the Corinthians.

But I still had Nadab and Abihu to use to create awe in the hearts of sincere people who might stray “beyond what was commanded.” “Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer, and put fire in it, and laid incense on it, and offered unholy fire before the Lord, such as he had not commanded them. And fire came forth from the presence of the Lord and devoured them, and they died before the Lord” (Lev. 10:1f).

What was going on there? Did they choose unholy (“strange”) fire which presumed on the silence of the scriptures? Had God given a commandment on the matter? Or had God given no definition of the fire to be used, and the two priests tested the silence of God?

Full explanation of this incident is not given in the Scriptures. In the context of Chapter 9, however, when Israel followed God's original instructions for offering sacrifices, *fire came down from the Lord to the altar* and consumed the sacrifices. The altar fire was *God's fire!* But Nadab and Abihu offered unholy fire and they, instead of their sacrifices, were consumed by the fire of God. After their deaths, Aaron was instructed to use coals of *fire from the altar* to burn incense (Lev. 16:12). We may conclude from this evidence that those two priests knew what God had commanded. If not, their whole procedure was unauthorized. Evidently they set themselves in opposition to God displaying either ignorance or defiance by using fire which God had not commanded. In Biblical accounts, God has not reacted so dramatically against sins of ignorance. If they had been trying sincerely to honor God, they certainly knew what to do. They were not presuming upon the "silence of the Scriptures." Their hearts were not right. They were challenging God.

In my review of this incident and my making it prohibit any worship not specifically commanded of God, I had to revisit with personal honesty many scenes of Bible record. Will you look at some of them again with me at this time?

In various ages we see persons offering unspecified (unauthorized!) acts of worship that were accepted. All people of all ages have been granted the privilege of praise. God has accepted, and expected, sincere worship even from those who had no direct or written revelation. He has looked upon the heart of the worshipper more than the technique of his praise. Men have been permitted to worship in formal procedures that expressed the feeling of the worshipper's heart so long as it (1) accomplished the purpose of praise, (2) was upbuilding to others present, (3) avoided sacramental and idolatrous concepts, (4) did not venerate objects, and (5) did not set aside God's prescribed actions or purposes. Let us look at some Biblical precedents that give basis to this premise. We have tended to overlook or misapply these.

☉ There is no indication that Abel was commanded either to make an offering or to offer from his flock. He was a man of faith, and because of it he and his sacrifice were acceptable (Heb. 11:4). We must no longer misapply Romans 10:17 in an effort to prove that God instructed him.

☉ When it is stated that, in the time of Enosh, "men began to call upon the name of the Lord" (Gen. 4:26), and when Abram "built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord" (Gen. 12:8), there is no indication that they did this in response to a command or specification of God. The record gives no indication that God told Abraham to offer the ram instead of Isaac.

☉ Jacob took the stone he had used for a pillow, made an altar of it, and poured oil on it in spontaneous worship without "authority" from God (Gen. 28:18). On another occasion, Jacob set up an altar and poured a drink offering and oil upon it (Gen. 35:14).

☉ Samuel drew water and poured it out before Jehovah and fasted (1 Sam. 7:6). David took the water brought from Bethlehem and poured it out to the Lord (2 Sam. 23:16). Where were their commands to do that?

☉ Without instruction from the Law of Moses, the Jews had added wine to the Passover (Luke 22:14-18; Matt. 26:26-28), dancing before the Lord (2 Sam. 6:12f; Psalms 149:3), and the entire synagogue service. Rather than being condemned for those unauthorized activities of worship, they were privileged to serve/worship in those ways. *Unscriptural* activities are not necessarily *anti-scriptural*. Because an activity may be

unauthorized does not necessarily mean that it is *prohibited*. The very Old Covenant writings that give us these two "prooftexts" indicate approval of all those unauthorized methods used to honor God.

☉ Paul commended the Athenians, declaring, "For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23). Although their understanding of God's nature was very limited and they knew not any code of laws from him, they had the privilege of worship, and their homage at that altar was not expressed in "five acts of worship" on Sundays. Paul did not condemn their devotion to the "unknown god" but enlarged on their understanding about his identity.

☉ In Chapter 1 of Romans, Paul declared that the Gentiles were without excuse because, having known God as revealed in nature, they "did not honor him as God or give thanks to him..." (v.21), "and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (v. 25). How could they have properly honored God, given thanks of praise to him, and worshipped and served the Creator since they had no revealed law? God has given all men, even the uninstructed, the privilege of praise and worship!

☉ In the New Testament writings we see numerous "unauthorized" actions of worship which were undemanded, unrehearsed, spontaneous, and extravagant; yet they met with approval. Although these were not done in Christian assemblies, they were expressions of approved worship and they illustrate the principle of acceptable worship. *Worship is worship whether done privately or in an assembly.*

☉ The Wise Men offered birthday gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to Jesus without evident instructions to do so (Matt. 2:1-11). It was their privilege to praise through that means.

☉ There are several instances of people falling before Jesus and worshipping him with no rebuke for their impulsive action. They had no command or instruction to worship in such a manner. An adoring crowd took their coats and leafy branches of trees and spread them before Jesus (Matt. 21:8f). We may do homage to God by bowing before him or by lifting up our hands to him. If the *amen* of approval at the end of a prayer is a part of the worship, so would the clapping of approval of the sentiment expressed in a song be worship also.

☉ Mary was neither rebuked for anointing Jesus without authorization nor considered presumptuous in using nard without instruction to do so (John 12:1f).

☉ The sinful woman was not commanded to wash Jesus' feet with tears nor to use her hair as a towel (Luke 7:36-50). She was exercising her privilege of spontaneous worship.

☉ According to the rules we have made, Paul sinned in cutting his hair in a ritual relating to a vow (Acts 21:23-16) and when he purified himself ritually and arranged for an offering in accordance to the Law of Moses. We would also have to censure the Judean disciples who "are zealous for the law". But we approve of disciples circumcising their infant sons, and we commend them for tithing.

With the sacrifice of Jesus, God did not suddenly come to hate the worship rituals of the law. Disciples could still keep those rituals of worship so long as they did not seek justification by those means. Neither should we assume that, when Jesus died, God began to hate circumcision, praise accompanied by instruments, or the observance of days, which things he had

accepted for centuries. Who are we to define what God likes or dislikes when he has accepted many different expressions of devotion?

Our great stress has been on the need for authority for all that we do in worship assemblies. We have emphasized the ritualistic aspect of worship. But where is our authority for segmenting worship from our daily and constant offering of self in whole-life worship? Where do the scriptures say that our assemblies for edification are to be changed into "worship services" with a different set of rules to govern them? Where do we read such expressions as "go to worship" (regarding Christian assemblies), "begin our worship service," "after the worship is over," and "missing worship"? Where do we read of the "five acts of worship" or a list of specified activities for our assemblies? Where do we find a limitation of the means whereby we may praise God and edify one another, either in or out of assemblies? Has our privilege of praise been granted in only a few activities? *Is it a privilege of praise or a fulfillment of the demands of law to praise?* Do we worship only in rituals? Are assemblies for the purpose of performance of rituals? Seeking answers to these questions led me to many exciting new (for me) insights.

In my restudy I became painfully aware that my two prooftexts, along with a long menu of others like them, were being misused to distort truth. In my application of them, I was "going beyond what is written" by trying to bind what God had not legislated! And I began to see that our "command, example, and necessary inference" approach to interpretation of God's will is a sad outgrowth of our effort to serve God through a supposed system of law. That formula cannot be followed consistently, and it has spawned our frequent divisions.

It was with some dismay that I was forced to conclude this: **There is no record in the Bible of God rejecting the sincere worship of anyone, regardless of the form of expression, or whether it had been commanded or not. God has always given all people, even the uninformed, the privilege of praise.**

It will be no surprise to me if some of you are shocked and dismayed by my conclusions if you do not understand the route that led me to them. So I urge you to start at my beginning by reading my first book, *Free In Christ*. I will give you a free copy if you will send your address. Some of the points of this essay are taken from Chapter 26 of *Free To Change*, which I can send postpaid for \$6.50.

All who serve God in humble sincerity are to be commended even though they may not fully understand his will – and who does? If any lay unwarranted strictures upon themselves, they are to be respected for their earnestness. However, if those personal convictions are made into criterion for judging, rejecting, and dividing there is evidence of sinful attitude.

If I were to try to lead you into an exclusive division of God's family which I might be promoting (even an *I am of Christ party!*), I would be doing what Paul warned against. Like the Corinthian leaders, I would be "going beyond what is written." Paul demands that I "not be inflated with pride as you patronize one and flout the other" (1 Cor. 4:6, NEB). [ch]

Hook's Points

Several years ago we began mailing a regular report to those who support this work. Then we started including articles. Requests to be put on the mailing list began to come, and they

continue to come, expanding our list beyond our expectations. We are pleased that you read our unsophisticated stuff. It is free for the asking. If you receive it and don't care to or do not have time to read it, please let us know in order to avoid waste. More than 200 of you now receive it by e-mail and 500 by regular mail. Even though the work involved becomes tiring, your encouragement keeps us going. Thank you for your kind expressions and for giving the financial resources for it.

We still include excerpts from our letters so you all may feel with each other and to let you who support this ministry financially know some of your effectiveness. They are addressed to me, but you are partners. I am just the donkey through whom God is delivering a message. (But if I am the donkey, who is the *Balaam?* ☺)

If you get in on the last minutes of a speech, you may not be ready for the conclusions of the speaker. Most of you receiving this have been with me through a process of learning, so you understand "where I am coming from." Now, all this material goes on World Wide Web. It can be read by you who know nothing of my educational journey. So we have to expect a lack of receptivity on the part of some, but we do not question your sincerity or love for truth. I urge all to read *Free In Christ* first in order to gain better perspective of my materials. You may then wish to read my later books also.

Through the relentless pace of time, God has permitted Lea and me enjoy Oregon for two years and to celebrate fifty-one years together (Oct. 8). Our years of "retirement" are peaceful and happy except for Lea's health problems which show no improvement. She still can do some household tasks but is limited in her activity due to weakness, unsteadiness, and inability to follow even familiar procedures, such as in cooking. Though it is frustrating for her, she shows strong will and courage. She is in no particular pain. Your prayers help.

Speaking of our anniversary, this quotation from Daniel Lynch is appropriate: *"How many times have you heard or read that 50 percent of U. S. marriages end in divorce? It's not true. Yes, the number of divorces each year is about half the number of marriages that same year. But that's like computing the death rate by comparing the number of people who die with the number of people who are born. That ignores those who neither were born nor died during that 12-month period. The 50-percent divorce figure ignores the number of intact marriages from years and decades earlier. The truth is that about one of 50 marriages ends each year, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. Pollster Louis Harris maintains that 90 percent of marriages survive until one partner dies."* (Reader's Digest, Nov. 1996, p. 90)

Louie and Helen Welch honored us with a brief visit recently. They married four years ago after each had lost a long-time spouse. I teased by asking if they went to pre-marital counseling. Louie allowed that such was not needed since, between the two of them, they brought 94 years of experience into the new marriage! He was mayor of Houston five terms.

In September 126 copies of FIC were sent out. Both the free distribution and sale of all the books have lagged in recent weeks. We do not know the reason for it, but we suspect that it is because the books are accessible to read or be copied on the World Wide Web.

During every election our respect for politicians erodes a bit more. Big money rules. Truth is obscured and deception is deliberate. That is more reason for us to stand by those of higher ethics and to pray that God will use them and over-rule evil men to lead to nobler goals.

If you have checked my web site lately, you have seen that four of **Carl Ketcherside's** books are now on the web! Work is going fast on that great project and reprint project. Bob Lewis, Vic Phares, Natalie Murrie, and Ron Hollman are putting much skilled effort in this endeavor.

There is exciting news about the **Ketcherside Reprint** project. A challenge gift of \$20,000 has been given! When this is matched, the \$75,000 shall have been reached enabling the printing to begin. So let's rush for the goal! To this time only commitments have been called for. Now is the time to be sending that money in. Make your check to *Ketcherside Reprint Project* and send it to Peace On Earth Ministries, P. O. Box 645, Joplin, MO 64802. Contributions are tax deductible. This fund is designed to be replenished with monies received from sales and will provide for subsequent reprintings of Carl's works for future generations. You may help now and save \$20 by advance purchase of the set of the 12 hardbound volumes containing 31 books or \$175.

Vic should have Bob Rowland's ***I Permit Not A Woman...To Remain Shackled*** on our site soon also.

And he, with help from Kevin Lovelace, has put a photo of him, Lea, and me at the site also. Lea looks great!

Are you a conservationist? We subscribed to the Sunday issues of *The Oregonian*, and they are sending the weekday issues free. As though I had nothing better to do, I weighed last week's accumulation of paper with its inserts. Eleven pounds! That's 572 pounds of reading material per year! For 100,000 subscribers, that is more than 500 tons of paper per week!

I have received mailouts from church-related projects like children's homes for years even though I might have never given a contribution. We never see a report of the cost of those publications and probably would be dismayed if we saw one. I know something of the cost of mailouts. If I had to pay others to publish FR, it would be unaffordable. It is unfortunate that so much contributed money is deemed needful to advertise a worthwhile cause.

A few weeks ago Stan Paher honored us by a visit. He is a publisher of secular material, but he also writes and publishes Christian literature. He has published much of Homer Hailey's writings. Two of his own are *Matthew 24*, setting forth that it was all fulfilled in the First Century, and *The Eternal Covenant of Peace*. He does not follow the usual dispensational approach, but teaches that God has had one covenant which has been adapted and expanded in different times. He left several copies of the latter book with me. You may get one from me for \$9.95 plus \$1.75 for mailing. (Price effective only through Jan. 15, 97). Or you may order it and others from him at Nevada Publications, 4135 Badger Circle, Reno, NV 89509; (702) 747-0800.

In spite of all our doctrinal conflicts, we can at least agree on the Ten Commandments, can we not? No way! The Protestants and Catholics list and number them differently. Catholics combine One and Two of the Protestant list into One leaving out reference to images, and they divide Ten into Nine and Ten. Or is it the Protestants who mess up the Catholic list?

When I tuned in to PBS to watch *Genesis: A Living Conversation With Bill Moyers*, I did not expect any fundamental approach. I did, however, expect the panelists to know the account of Cain and Abel which they discussed. They were concerned about Cain, this sincere worshipper, whom God rejected in favor of Abel as though God was partial. But God explained to Cain, "If you do well, will you not be accepted?"

Abel was a righteous man but Cain was not (1 John 3:11f), and he tried to please God with rituals from an evil heart. Also, the panel, overlooking that Adam and Eve had other children, indicated that the earth is populated by descendants of Cain.

If you are going to be judged by factual knowledge of the Scriptures, you had better start cramming for the final. If you had died last night and were called in judgment to answer, "What woman once dreamed of Jesus?", how ready would you have been to answer? Your 10 seconds is up!

I just have to tell you about my tomato crop this year even though it will tempt some to envy and to competitive exaggeration. A number of them weighed more than a pound. The largest was one pound and five ounces. And so good!!

What I Hear From You

[I trust that you are aware that letters and notes sent are not revised, edited, and corrected for publication by those writing them. They are jotted hurriedly and casually as friendly greetings. For sake of brevity, sometimes I excerpt, omit, and combine paragraphs.]

"Dear Cecil & Lea, Thank you and praise be to God that you have allowed His Spirit to work in your lives. I had come to many of your conclusions and had been discouraged for years with the Pharisaic attitude of many of my brothers and sisters in "the church of Christ." I am praying for reformation in that sect and that they will adopt a spirit of humility." -Austria

"I am thoroughly enjoying the book you edited from the works of Leroy Garrett and Carl Ketcherside on our heritage from the Stone-Campbell Movement. I had never studied any of this material before, though I had heard it mentioned in various sermons from my childhood. However, after absorbing nearly half the book over the weekend, I have a new appreciation for those who founded this movement. I am also reading *Free To Change* at this same time and am once again being refreshed by the messages there. You are doing a marvelous work. Without your courage and willingness to write and teach these concepts, many, many people would still be living without hope or joy in their lives, including myself. I thank God for you and your tireless hours and your lack of want of material gain so that the message can go out to all who are willing to hear. May God bless you and keep you, and I pray he will give me the courage to take up the challenge to share this 'good news' with everyone who will listen!" -Beth Durrance. <bdurrance@vysis.com>

"I came into the prison system 18 months ago a Baptist (Southern I was always told). I was baptized in my early teens and by the time I reached 20 I had been so turned off by congregations name calling, infighting, and churches running pastors off that I quit going. I backslid and that road led me to where I am today. After being incarcerated for two months I decided I never read the Bible cover to cover, so I read the N.T. first. Then I started attending a fundamental Baptist Bible study. After one year I realized I didn't want to be a Baptist but wanted to be a Christian. I had come to realize I was listening to what other people and their view or interpretation of the Bible said. Then Kenny gave me your book *Free In Christ* to read. Boy! Everything I was feeling and had come to realize on my own was in your book. Thanks again for writing your books. Without them I felt like a rebel or revolutionist without a cause or direction. Now I know there are people who feel like I do and can help me. Thanks!" -Peter Jernigan, Pensacola, FL.

"My husband is studying with a co-worker, trying to overcome the old judgmental Church of Christ stigma of being

'right.' It's so sad that is what we are known for – not at all the purpose of the church. We have to waste so much time dealing with that impression before we can let the real view of Jesus be evident." -Muriel Brown, Louisville, KY.

"Kindly and humbly allow me to introduce to you myself. I am Jesse C. Duque, Sr., 45 years old, a product of Philippine Bible College in Luzon, Baguio City in 1972. I've been preaching for many years now. Bro. Cecil, how I wish to have a free copy of *Free In Christ* literature. I have learned that you have some books of this kind, but I don't have money to pay for these useful books. So help me brother to have these good books. We are very poor financially but rich spiritually. Remember us always in your prayers especially the work for the Lord in this country that the Islam religion will not be enforced on us in Mindanao Island." [I sent 11 books, gifts from you partners.]

"I have been enjoying your books so much. Some of the things that you are teaching, I have been coming to the same conclusions gradually. Now you have made them clearer for me. I've got to go back and unteach some of the things I have been teaching for years. I have been a member of the church of Christ for about forty years. Another thing – God sent Pat and Charlie Coleman to us when I needed them most. Praise God!" -Jean King, Clyde, TX.

"I am not now, nor have I ever been a member of the Church of Christ. But I grew up as a member of another very legalistic group that has changed a great deal in the past year. I am in the process of studying everything I've ever thought I believed about God and his Word. I'm not about to just accept everything orthodox Christianity believes without studying it for myself. The main reason I've stayed away from the local CoC is due to the legalism I've picked up from those who are members. The 'minor' reason is because I sing much better with musical accompaniment! -Fairfield, TX.

"I'm a 28 year old Christian Church'er, aspiring minister-to-be. (Lord willing.) I also think of myself as an up-and-coming 'freedom fighter' which I playfully call Dr. Garrett, Ketcherside, and you. I would also put Max Lucado in that class of 'true Stone-Campbell Movement heirs.' I remember reading your *Free In Christ* book what seems six or seven years ago...Good stuff! That's where I started in my 'free' thinking. And now these two guys! And our history!!! I love this stuff!!" - Brian Willard, <bwillard@carilion.com>.

"Thanks for staying with the Church of Christ through all the years. Many of us have been blessed by your writings as well as those of Leroy Garrett and others. My wife and I met you back in 1985 at the Central church in Irving at a 'change' conference. I'm now working part-time as 'worship / music minister' at the Quail Springs Church of Christ in Oklahoma City. We move slowly but steadily to the heart of Christ. Another life-long C of C member, free in Christ." -Gary Bruce <Brucegang@aol.com>

"I am continually amazed with the ability of certain folk to totally absorb themselves in the world of Judeo-Christian superstition. This denies the existence of growth and requires one to look backward only. I believe in the glory of the human spirit and the ability to look outward. The church of Christ is secular and soooo limited in its view of the majority of the world's people. Shame on you for tying your hands and attempting to tie those of your 'sheep'. May 'Baldr the Brilliant' have mercy on your little intellect." -Roy <howell@compassnet.com>

"I am a 'member' of the CofC in Newport, RI. A brother in the congregation turned me on to your writings about a year

ago. I am in awe of the insight that you consistently bring to the word of God. Legalism makes my stomach turn and causes my spirit to grieve. I believe that most of the legalists I know are driven by an intense desire to be Godly people. Unfortunately they tend to want to bind their 'way' on others. I would like to say to any legalist that may happen across your newsletter... All of us are wrong about something. We need to constantly re-evaluate our understanding of our infinite God. Unless we humbly consider ourselves as unfinished pottery, we will never grow or learn how to properly represent the undeserved grace that we have been fortunate enough to have been immersed into. I think that it is quite significant that both Jesus and Paul were most critical of legalists! "For freedom's sake we have been set free." Let's cast off our shackles and dance in the light!!" -Michael J. Securo <mjs777@ids.net>

"Almost 14 years ago God started to show me His covenant of grace. It was a trying time as I could not find one soul who agreed with me. Even my wife was scared by what I felt God was saying to me. For seven of those years I was completely alone but it was also a very special time. When I finally got to the point where I could no longer quiet the voice in my heart, as it was really starting to rage, and I decided to believe in it rather than what everyone else told me to believe, boy did things start to change. Being in Montana, it was no small miracle that I ended up in Boston, Mass. And while trying to kill time found myself in a small run down church that had a broken down ex-drug user Vietnam Vet for a preacher. It was the first time I heard the message of God's grace preached from a pulpit. My heart soared. God has since opened my wife's eyes. My heart still breaks up in rejoicing when I encounter the message of God's grace set forth plainly as on you URL. Preach it, brother, and may the Grace and Peace of our Lord Jesus Christ overflow your heart today and forever." -Brad <breeel@ixi.net>

"I just wanted you to know how much I enjoy your web site. I was raised in a Missionary Baptist Church. So much of what you have said sounds like my life. I have surrendered to the ministry. We are at this time members of an Independent Baptist Church. I have found all churches seem to have a real hang up if you don't fall in line. I'm sorry, I just can't do it. God gave me a mind and His word so I have learned to think for myself. I have found preachers really don't like that. It challenges their position. My priority is not preachers, or family, or even churches. My main priority is my relationship with Jesus Christ." -Ben Byrd <bbyrd@yournet.com>

"I just received my copy of *Free In Christ* last week and am on my second reading. I have been struggling and growing for a couple of years with my understanding of the Gospel. Your discussion of 'principle vs. command' has been my epiphany. Thank you. Thanks also to Vic Phares for e-mailing me on AOL about the website, and to everyone else involved in spreading this good news about the Good News." -David Guin <Dguin@hogan-smith.com>

"I stumbled across your material and was so glad to discover it! I am a Church of Christ minister, brand: instrumental - many cups - celebrate Christmas - use praise choruses - etc. Isn't it something how we have to classify ourselves? I glanced through your writings and couldn't agree with you more. I also learned - your thoughts on practice by example hit home and straightened me out on poor interpretation. You must have gone through much to get to the freedom you now have in Christ. I also grew up in a very legalistic instrumental congregation which split about 8 years ago. The old die hard congregation has about 50 people - and the non-legalistic congregation is growing rapidly with over 400 on Sunday

morning. I have ministered in Clarion, Iowa for the past 15 years and we fought through much legalism and traditionalism. I praise God for servant elders and a very loving congregation. God is blessing!!! Several years ago I had the opportunity to lead music in a revival with Carl Ketcherside! What a blessing and a man of God!" -Mark Young <mrkyoung@netins.net>

"I always enjoy telling you how much you have helped me in my search for a joyous spiritual life. I read your books over and over and each time I find something profound to me that I missed in other readings. It is so great though to really

change of heart and find the freedom in Christ we have found." - Steve & Veronica Stow, Modesto, CA.

<<http://www.freedomring.org>>

<hookc@teleport.com> or <cecil@freedomring.org>

You are partners when you pass the books along.

understand faith salvation vs. works. I still feel guilty at times knowing that I have never done enough for the cause of Christ but when I really stop and meditate on saving grace I can forgive myself because I know he forgives me." -Derrel Schoonover, Olney, TX.

"I can't tell you what a change your books made in me after studying and then looking up the scriptures to verify it. When I read and study the Bible now, I know my savior, Jesus, a lot better. I am surely glad that there's somebody like you who can explain in simple terms what so many Bible verses are really saying instead of having them slanted and stilted from a pulpit." -Bill Walden, Russellville, KY.

"I was already in a place where I was questioning some of our traditions / doctrines and your book so lovingly and so thoughtfully addressed some of those issues and more. I'd like to say how much I appreciate the way you presented the issues but refrained from telling me what conclusions to reach. How refreshing that was! And thought provoking! When you asked, 'Which of these nine examples of details concerning the Lord's Supper are binding?' (p. 140), I thought about that for the next week quite frequently, and I still ponder it today. And that is only one example. Thank you, brother Hook, for your love expressed in even writing this book. I know my life is changed for the better for having read it." -Mrs. Leslie Kelly, Port Orchard, WA.

"Your writings are very indepth and force one to reexamine and look deeper into scripture. There is such a need for a revolution in the mind of the Lord's church and I think we are witnessing it as I write this letter. There is a group of us who have recently become independent of the 'Church of Christ' governing body. Our latest ventures, under the Lord, have been worshipping in a park where several homeless people hang out. After our worship we feed ourselves and anyone else who wants to eat. This has been very rewarding for us, and we are open to wherever the Lord leads us. There are so many Christians here who are disturbed and feel bound to the rules and regulations handed down by tradition and maintained by elders and other staunch leaders in the church. My husband and I, along with others, would like to study with some of these brothers and sisters. We think by supplying them with you book and having a set time to study with them, with the Lord's help, the Lord working through us, some brothers and sisters may have a