

FREEDOM'S RING

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

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I JOINED THE CHURCH OF CHRIST

Detecting The Fatal Flaw In Our Undenominational Claim

One cannot join the Lord's church. When the people on Pentecost were baptized for the remission of sins, the Lord added them to his church. Those people did not have to decide which church to join, for the Lord added them to his one and only church. There was no worry about being made a part of the wrong church. The Lord's church is not a denomination, sect, or division, for following the Bible will not make anyone a member of such. The gospel only produces Christians only, and one must go beyond the Scriptures to make one a sectarian, denominational Christian. By the same procedure through which people are saved, they are added to the one undenominational church of Christ. Those in the Church of Christ have never joined a church, but the Lord added them to it when he saved them. Therefore, we can be sure that we are not sectarian or denominational Christians.

Countless times throughout my years of preaching, I offered my listeners some such explanation as I have given in the preceding paragraph. It seems so true, air-tight, appealing, and to be the simple answer to solve the problem of division. This is the only way that we can all be one in the same church. That plea is so simple, understandable, and appealing that even I had moderate success in convincing others that it is God's way.

A person who is logical enough to form the above statement should be logical enough to see its weakness; however, it took me many years to come to recognize the overly simplistic nature of the explanation. If the Lord adds us to the one Church of Christ (or, church of Christ, if you prefer), which is not a sect, division, or denomination, how do we explain the many divisions among the churches of Christ? How does one get into one of the various groups who are dissociated from one another? Did the Lord add me to one of them, all of them, or none of them?

When I obeyed the gospel, the Lord added me to his one church which happened to be non-instrumental, amillennial, and non-charismatic, and made use of multiple communion cups, Sunday School, women teachers, and orphanages. I never sought out such a church and did not apply for membership in it. I was just added to it, sort of automatically!

Others obeyed the same gospel and were added by the same Lord to his one church which happened to use only one cup in the communion and deplore Sunday School and women teachers. This group dissociated itself from the one I was in. These disciples had taken no steps to join a division any more than I had.

Still others obeyed the same gospel and were added by the same Lord to the same church which happened to use instrumental accompaniment to singing. Those people took no steps to join a sect, but remained in the church the Lord had added them to. Both of the former groups refused fellowship with this instrumental Church of Christ.

Then there were those who obeyed the same gospel and were added by the same Lord to his one church and found themselves to be in the Christian Church instead of the Church of Christ! They joined nothing and I joined nothing, but we wound up in different dissociating groups. Surely, God moves in mysterious ways, doesn't he?

The truth may reveal that many other persons obeyed the same gospel and found their membership to be in groups with still other names.

We are not questioning that the Lord added all these people to his one church, but somebody joined a sectarian division also. Who was it? "Not!!" we hear from each one involved.

While I was a teenager, my grandfather spent one summer with us. His conviction was that we should not divide the assembly into classes. But he would go to class each Sunday, sitting in the adult class. When I questioned him about it, Grandpa explained that he did not go to classes. He just went to the assembly and the other people divided it by going to classes. Actually, they just pulled thin curtains hanging on wires; no one had to go anywhere. That's the kind of explanations that we have made to justify our alignment in different exclusive sects of the Lord's church. We are in the one the Lord added us to and it is others who have divided from us! As the cat gave out a loud "yeow," the mother yelled, "Tommy, stop pulling that cat's tail!" "I'm not pulling it, Mother," he protested, "I'm just holding it; he's doing the pulling!" No one wants to take the blame for anything.

One can join a group without applying for membership, being voted on, or conforming to any formality of recognition. When I was added by the Lord to his one church as a boy, I then joined an exclusive group in the church universal by my presence, participation, and support. No application of membership was made and no formal acceptance by the group was made, but the fact that I had become a part of that church which dissociated itself from other people whom the Lord had added was understood. If I had, as a professing Catholic, come into the group by presence, participation, and support, I would have experienced silent rejection, if not formal disfellowship. A Catholic could not have joined. But as a baptized believer, my joining was verified by congregational acceptance, "unofficial" as it might have been.

The same procedure prevails in the various divisions of the Lord's church. We join them. Even though it is still true that the Lord adds us to his church when he saves us, he does not add us to a Church of Christ. We join our sectarian congregations which we designate as the Church of Christ. Isn't it time for us to recognize that, to eat our humble pie, and to confess, "I joined the Church of Christ of which I am a member!"? After you were baptized and added by the Lord to the group that you are in without your joining it, could that group later withdraw fellowship from you? Well, yes! If they disfellowship you, they operate on the understanding that you are a part of that church. Somehow,

you got into it, and it is less than the entire body of those added to the church by the Lord. God did not add you to it.

If you ever moved to another place, very likely you “placed membership” with a church in your new community. That is a ridiculous term, as though membership is something you can put somewhere, a euphemism invented to avoid using the term “join the church.” The Scriptures do not even speak of “members of the church.” We don’t “join the church”; we just “place membership!” By such action after you were baptized, you definitely identified yourself with a church that did not recognize all others in the body of Christ; hence, you joined a sectarian group.

While we are confessing, should we not go ahead and admit that we are aligned with a sect? Any group that refuses to recognize and accept others whom the Lord added to his church, as we have practiced in creating our divisions, is a sect. Who can deny that we meet that definition? And when we give ourselves a distinguishing name, we denominate ourselves. That’s a hard admission for us to make.

Is there a solution and remedy for this deadly disease? Ideally, we would all be able to agree on all points of doctrine and practice and be one in the most literal sense. That is both improbable and impractical. It has never been and there is little prospect that it will ever be. I question that Jesus had that in mind when he prayed for our unity, for he knew that we are humans rather than angels. He brought the saved to God in one body, not in fenced off congregations.

The Scriptural and practical solution is for us to quit judging others in Christ who hold differing views from ours and to accept them as brothers equal before the Lord. No one must compromise his convictions; all do not need to meet in the same congregation; and all do not have to believe and practice in total conformity. But all can love one another, accept each other, and work together in serving our heavenly Father.

Division or sectarianism is not so much the meeting in separate groups as it is a judgmental spirit. Each can have his own convictions of faith between himself and the Lord (Rom. 14:22), but one fails to discern the one body when he judges his brother even while continuing to commune with him (1 Cor. 11:29), and thus he eats and drinks damnation to his soul. In view of our practice, that becomes very frightening.

Some earnest disciples start new groups in an effort to be nonsectarian and non-denominational. I can appreciate that fully. But why start a new group when there are already other non-sectarian, undenominational churches in your community? Why not join one of them? “I do not agree with their doctrines and/or practices,” you reply. Then just how non-sectarian is your group if it refuses fellowship with others who make the same claim that you make? You start another denomination when you start a group which must distinguish (denominate) itself from other non-sectarian churches. If nonsectarian, non-denominational churches are truly that, why do they not all unite—including the various Church of Christ groups who make that claim? “Non-denominational” churches become “non-denominational” denominations!

I joined the Church of Christ – in fact, several of them. The Lord added me to his church and then I joined local fragments of the universal church by my identity with them which implied that I was part of them. The Churches of Christ which I served as a career minister would be characterized generally as judgmental, exclusive, and sectarian in spirit, and many who composed them held convictions different from mine. While being a part of such a group, one may disavow what he considers to be error;

cultivate an accepting, nonsectarian spirit, and seek diligently to correct those evils which make the local group sectarian and denominational. I do not know what course anyone can take that will be more remedial of our ills.

All churches need constant reform, but only the Savior can remove the candlestick. Epistles were written to bring about correction and reform in churches, but in no epistle were disciples told to leave a misdirected church and start a pure one. []

(The above is Chapter 26 of my book *Free As Sons* with some revisions.)

Intelligent, But Not Too Smart

When I say that others are not too smart, I obviously put myself in the list of smart people. All of us, at least secretly, think we are discerning persons who follow the sane and sensible course. We can detect the flaws in the reasoning of others. Some of the conclusions of others are so illogical that we can be amused by them. But not our own!

In view of this, I feel confident that you will cut me some slack as I proceed. You will detect that my talent is in pointing out the inconsistencies of the rest of you. ☺

We are blessed to live in the age of scientific information and to have educational advantages exceeding the dreams of previous generations. However, preconceptions, emotions, and subjectivity can prevent us from processing accurately the information we receive. You will be able to agree with me as I illustrate this—until I mention something concerning which you have an emotional hangup. Let’s see.

Carl Sagan died last week. We enjoyed his educational programs which revealed the mysteries of creation, especially those concerning the limitless heavens and “billions and billions” of heavenly bodies. He was deeply intelligent, but he was not sensible enough to admit that the creation has a Creator.

We are astute to figure out that the new century and new millennium will begin January 1, 2001, but that will not keep most people from celebrating January 1, 2000 as the starting time! (Or, have you not figured that out? Let me illustrate: you are not a year old when born but after the first year. You are ten only after you have completed ten years and begin the eleventh. So it is with centuries and millennia.) In spite of knowing this, we will celebrate the new century and new millennium a year early!

Keiko, the “Free Willie” whale, has been called “the six million dollar whale” because that much has been spent to prepare a place for the diseased creature down the coast at Newport and to transport him/her there. And that is not all, for there is continued cost of personnel to care for the whale and to purchase and feed the 150 pounds of fish needed daily.

Such care for a whale may be the intelligent and emotional thing to do, but is that the smart (sensible) thing when we have to leave countless sick and starving children without the help they need just to survive?

Mistreated and injured animals are often given extensive care and expensive treatment to restore them while at the same time thousands of unwanted animals must be put to death in our large cities each year.

Many sincere people have tried to make a spiritual, Bible-directed, activity of preserving our environment. Drastic efforts are made to preserve endangered species from extinction as though it were a mandate from God. But observe how God

handled all this before we took over. He didn't control erosion very well, he allowed the air to be polluted by countless volcanic eruptions, he permitted various minerals to leach into streams and lakes, he let grasslands and timberlands burn and endanger wildlife, and he allowed many kinds of creatures to become extinct.

Great demands are being made to preserve the habitat of the wild creatures because of claims that they cannot adapt to changes brought by man. Just this year, however, in this immediate highly developed area, some of the most shy creatures have surprised us. A peregrine falcon roosts on a downtown Portland bridge across the Willamette River. Crows eat out of the dumpsters, and one swooped within a few feet of our moving car recently. The elusive coyotes have become a problem by their eating a lot of neighborhood cats. Cougars have been spotted even close to schools. A dove built her nest on the hood of a car on a car lot in the city. And in many populated areas the deer make gardening impossible. Yes, wise conservation is needed, but it must be weighed in view of human need rather than trying to keep the earth in some primeval condition – which has always been undergoing drastic, destructive changes.

A generation has been nurtured on movie and television portrayal of animals with human feelings and characteristics. So animal life is being considered by some as about as sacred as human life – even more than unborn human life. Vegetarian diet is being preached with religious fervor. God's word is ruled out in favor of our intelligence, for he said, "Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and as I gave the green plants, I give you everything" (Gen. 9:3; Also see 1 Tim. 4:1-5). In such things we trust more in sophisticated logic than in being sensible.

It would be nice to be able to save all our trees, however those who cry loudest to save our forests still want to live in houses and read newspapers made from them. These are human needs. If we save one forest, it only means that lumber and pulp must be taken from another somewhere else to serve our needs.

Environmentalists make it difficult for the oil, chemical, and manufacturing industries these days, yet the protesters want to drive their automobiles, have their houses heated, and use many things daily that necessarily create hazardous waste in being made. Is that being really smart?

Oregon rivers could produce enough electricity for many millions of people so that they would need no oil or gas for household use. But protesters are even advocating removal of existing dams in order to save the habitat of salmon.

A bad attitude against big businesses and highly paid business executives has been cultivated in our time, but the critics still like their products, stock in their companies, and the good jobs they offer. They have launched no campaigns against athletes, actors, and entertainers receiving riches far in excess of that of CEOs.

Those who cry out against use of animals in medical science don't refuse medications and procedures first tested on animals. They don't offer themselves as guinea pigs.

While women are having such a field day with sexual harassment lawsuits, they dress and conduct themselves in the most sexually enticing manner that our loose laws and morals allow in order to gain the lustful attention of men. Is that sensible, or am I the insensitive one by putting some blame on the women?

Enough of that. I have probably been successful in agitating most of you by now. We will all agree that intelligent approach should be made to all these things mentioned so that sensible solutions can be found. The problem is that we cannot agree on what is intelligent and sensible. However, so far the things mentioned in illustration have less to do with spiritual values and practical religion. Now we get into the sticky stuff.

I am writing this on Christmas day, 1996. In former years I joined with other objectors to giving special attention to Christmas and Easter. I decried the emphasis given to any religious holiday. I could present the tedious arguments against such. However, I was among the chief offenders, for I emphasized the first day of every week as a special day of worship and service – a religious holiday. The scriptures support no such emphasis but, on the contrary, Paul gives the keeping of days neither a plus nor a minus in Romans 14:5-9. Individual preference! My attempts at logic did not make me smart enough to accept Paul's simple statement.

Since I reasoned that we must follow intelligence instead of emotions, I disdained people like the Pentecostals who would pray with uplifted hands. I was so sensible in my reasoning that I could countermand Paul's instructions for people to lift up hands in prayer (1 Tim. 2:8)! It is nice that you are too smart to do such a thing.

Even though I have been intelligent enough all along to know that Paul spoke of Phoebe being a deaconess (Rom. 16:1), I was smart enough to know that other teachings about the role of women would prevent her from filling the appointment of a deaconess! Don't be upset, for I am talking about myself, not you!

I didn't have to go to college to learn that women are not to exercise authority over men. So it is clear that she cannot pass the communion or collection trays, usher, lead singing, head a committee, or serve as treasurer of the congregation. We just cannot afford to let her usurp authority over men by serving them! Smart! ☺ And since she cannot speak in the assembly or teach a man (as we so laboriously argue) we are sensible enough to let her do these things only in song or on the printed page. Even with the men listening in silence, we permit her to teach and pray in song. Never mind that the scriptures say nothing about a church treasury, passing collection baskets, serving communion, ushering, serving on committees, or leading singing. Nevertheless, these become men's prerogatives when we intelligent beings institute them! We are growing smarter progressively!

Even though Jesus began the Communion during a Passover meal, and the church in Corinth ate the ritual meal during a fellowship meal, we know that such a thing is sinful because Paul told hungry, greedy, divisive people to eat at home rather than to divide and disrespect the body. "What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in?" (1 Cor. 11:22). Suddenly, the assembly becomes a "church building." It is sinful to eat and drink in a certain structure. They were drinking wine, for some were getting drunk. Drink that at home, Paul demands! But you may drink water in the structure. You may assemble in a non-church building and eat (but not drink wine). You may not eat where you worship but you can worship by offering thanks where you eat. It is sinful to have a kitchen in a "church building" but a drinking fountain and restroom are approved. They were told to eat in their homes, but it is all right to eat in the cafeteria instead. In which area are we growing faster, intelligence or smarts? Do we not need a *head start program* to help us learn that it was not the practice of eating together that was to be stopped but it was the abuse that turned it into a drunken, divisive gathering that Paul was condemning?

We intelligent people have known that it is sinful to sing meditative songs while we are partaking of the bread and wine (Oops, fruit of the vine!) because that is having two forms of worship at the same time. Of course, if you want to pray privately or read Scriptures (worship?) while the trays are being passed, that is fine! ☺

Who has read in the Scriptures instruction, permission, or example for taking the children out during the preaching so they can be taught at their own level? Such is not “authorized.” But where do you read of children being in the assembly in the first place?

We have been very discerning in the use of money from the church treasury. Never mind that we don’t read in the Scriptures of a church treasury or a list of causes for which a group may rightly decide to collect and use money.

Every intelligent, honest person knows that the Scriptures authorize congregational singing only. At the moment, I cannot recall where those passages are, but it surely says that somewhere. Oh, yes, I have found it. In 1 Corinthians 14:26 (the “assembly chapter”), Paul says, “When you come together, each one has a hymn, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation.” Even though the gifts of revelation, tongues, and interpretations were exercised individually rather than congregationally, we know that Paul meant, “Each one has a hymn to lead!” Good sense always prevails!

Carl Sagan helped create in us an awe for our mysterious, limitless universe. We are such tiny specks in it. We are more sensible than he, however, in recognizing with reverence and worshipful awe an omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient Creator and Sustainer. The loving character of our God is revealed in his effort to bring us back into communion with him and to be glorified with him eternally. Deity gave himself to make this possible. By our intelligence, we can believe this factually, but how sensible are we in our practical application?

Is it possible that this creator of the billions of stars who made plans to save us from the time of Adam, came to earth in human flesh, and died as our substitute is concerned with our hair-splitting trifles? Is he trying to save us or entrap us by details? It is we, not God, who make big issues of such trivial things.

Will he condemn to eternal damnation both the woman and the men she converts to Christ through her loving proclamation of the gospel? Is he so incensed by people lifting up hands in prayer, or clapping while singing praise to him, or singing a worshipful song during communion, or eating a fellowship meal together in their “church building”, or being uplifted by a touching song by a quartet, or cooperating congregationally with other congregations in a worthwhile project, or dividing the assembly into classes for instruction, or drinking wine from individual glasses, or accompanying their praise with instruments – is he so incensed by any of these trivialities that the sincerest of worship becomes damning, his love turns to disgust, his grace is replaced by vengeance, and his justification reverts to eternal condemnation?

Does the one who died to save us reject us so readily? What kind of a God do you have? He knows you cannot be saved by your correctness, else Christ died in vain. He only wants your trust, acceptance, and praise.

Well, to any who might still be with me, I’ll admit that I have served you a dish of prickly pears. In this hodge-podge, my format has not been followed. You, being both intelligent and sensible, might safely conclude that I am neither. But try picking out all those stickers! Prickly pear stickers have barbs making them extremely painful to pull out. Growing up with

them on the farm, I found that they come out easier after they have festered, if you can just bear the discomfort for a while. So give yourself some time.

Intelligent people can devise high-sounding, scholarly, sophisticated argumentation for anything they wish to advocate or make an issue of. We can make black appear white and white seem gray. We are not too smart, however, when we convince ourselves contrary to common sense!

Even we who are not so endowed intellectually are not exempt from using some “horse sense.” Maybe that’s not a scriptural term, but it is not anti-scriptural. Paul exhorts, “Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is” (Eph. 5:17). Since he does not outline a formula for understanding, he must be encouraging us to use the common sense with which we are endowed. While it is true that intelligence and “horse sense” will not bring us all to the same conclusions about everything, they should lead in that direction as we realize that God is trying to save us rather than to entrap us. And good sense will lead us to accept and work with other sincere disciples while making allowance for our differences. []

Homosexual Persons vs. Homosexual Practices

(This letter is copied just as it came by e-mail. If it had been written for publication, no doubt, it would have been more refined in expression. The writer signed his name, but I will not use it, for I do not intend for this to be a personal response or confrontation. The letter is used as a basis for more discussion of this emotionally charged subject. I responded to him by e-mail, but the letter did not go through. ch)

“I have a few messages for you. First of all I would like to encourage you to continue seeking God, for in seeking our living God you will find love and truth. This is of utter importance since you are making your views so available on the WWW. Secondly I would like you to reconsider an issue which I feel will cause you grave trouble in the future.

“It is the fact that you do not know directly of God’s will since you are not God. You may “know” well of your interpretation of the bible, but the bible is not God. It is a tool to be used to seek truth, but it is not perfect. Only God is perfect. And we only know the mind of Christ, not the mind of God. So please be careful with your approach.

“And finally, in regards to homosexuality, I want you to know a few things. I’ve spent years trying to witness to the homosexual community in San Francisco. So many there feel rejected by God, when they have in truth been rejected by “religion”. Christ loves them and even died for them, and they have forgiveness. They are no less worthy than you to enter the Kingdom.

“In regards to how Christ feels about homosexuals, let’s look at that tool, the bible, which you use so fervently. In regards to men and women marrying...”This teaching does not apply to everyone, but only to those whom God has given it. For there are different reasons why men cannot marry: SOME, BECAUSE THEY WERE BORN THAT WAY; others, because men made them that way; and others do not marry for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Let him who can accept this teaching do so.” (The words of Christ according to the Gospel of John 19:11-12)

“Please do a little soul searching today. Thanks. Love in Life,” (Signed)

Although I have written much more about heterosexual sins than homosexual sins, I have never been reproached for condemning lust, fornication, or adultery. My one brief article about

homosexuality listed on my website drew both this response and a scolding by one for my mentioning my compassion for homosexuals. This son of a Baptist preacher did not want my condescending compassion, for he felt he was more upright in his practice than I in my censuring it. I doubt that his father would agree. Those who propose to practice Christianity and same-sex activity at the same time have now become more aggressive against their critics.

To begin, I will admit that the thought of same-sex relations is about as appealing to me as thoughts of eating roast Dalmatian. Not much higher in rank is the thought of wearing a ring in my nose, tongue, or lip. My opposition to homosexual practices is not based upon my detestation but upon convictions based upon Scripture. As much as I am repulsed by rings in the nose, tongue, or lip, I do not oppose others who want those things for those practices have nothing to do with morality or spirituality. What I like or dislike is not my basis of discernment.

Since my first reading of the entire Bible more than sixty years ago, I have not found one reference where there was approval of homosexuality. No neutrality. No non-judgmental references to it. All bad press! So, in order to uphold it as proper, the standard of moral teaching, the Bible, must be questioned or circumvented. That is what the letter writer has done, as you can readily see. He even sets Christ against God. He indicates that I cannot know the will of God through the Bible but then quotes from it in an effort to uphold his argument. I have a tract titled, *Christianity and Homosexuality*, published by The Metropolitan Community Church of Dallas which is a church for homosexuals. The defenses put forth in it are as lacking in Biblical evidence, logic, and sophistication as the letter above. By its reckless argumentation one would be at a loss to define any activity as sinful.

If we cannot know the will of God from the Bible, where do we go to find it? When people wish to justify their sinful practices, too often they turn to subjectivity based on wishful thinking and emotion. How else can "Christians" justify their promiscuous sex, living together without marriage, declaring that alcoholism is a disease rather than a sin, homosexual practices, transvestism, uninhibited divorce and remarriage, and other practices that are condemned in the Scriptures? The will of persons is substituted for the will of God.

Many passages indicate that we can know and do the will of God. (Consider: Rom. 12:1f; Matt. 7:21; Eph. 6:6; Col. 4:12.) I can see why one would not want to consider this passage as expressing the will of God: *"For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from immorality; that each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God; that no man transgress, and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, as we solemnly forewarned you. For God has not called us for uncleanness, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you" (1 Thes. 4:3-8; See 1 Peter 4:1-5).*

The writer of the letter has spent years witnessing to the "homosexual community." That active love and zeal is appreciated. They, as well as everyone else, need to hear the Gospel of salvation. He is to be commended highly if he has been "witnessing" to them 1 Corinthians 6:9-11: *"Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you*

were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God." May a person who refuses to give up the practice of either of the sins that Paul lists claim cleansing and entrance into the kingdom of God?

Paul tells of others who were unrepentant, so "For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error" (Rom. 1:26f). If these writings of Paul do not tell us of the will of God concerning these specific activities, where will we go to find God's will? Paul, directed by the Spirit, wrote those truths, and their truthfulness does not depend upon my understanding or my attitude toward any of the specific sins. So do not judge the person who lovingly teaches the will of God of having a bad attitude, a prejudiced mind, or ignorance of the truth.

Yes, God loves them even as he loves me. They are no less worthy than I, but I am saved by Christ's worthiness, not my own. Christ died for them and atoned for their sins as well as mine. They have forgiveness awaiting their acceptance of it just as any of the rest of us sinners. But no one can claim that forgiveness who has no intention of turning from the practice of sin. *Repent* is not an empty word. *Repentance* is not optional. It was the message of the prophets of old, of John the Baptist, of Jesus, and of his apostles. While it is true that the determination to refrain from sin does not guarantee that the person will never stumble in moments of weakness, the determination must be there. *"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it. ... What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to any one as obedient slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness. But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness"* (Romans 6:1-15-18).

As to homosexuals being rejected by religion instead of by God, that is a prejudicial disparagement. I do not claim universal knowledge on this point, but I have never known of a church rejecting a member simply because he or she had same-gender attraction. It is not the same-sex attraction that is at issue but it is their sexual practice. Homosexual desires are no cause for rejection any more than are heterosexual desires. When persons expressed desire to become a part of the congregations where I served, I never subjected them to questions of a private nature. However, if a man had confided to me his homosexual orientation indicating his intention of abstinence, I would have welcomed him and offered him what help I might have been able to give, and I would have done the same to a single heterosexual man or woman. If, however, Jim and Tim, wishing to be in our congregation, were to have confided that they were homosexual partners committed to living with each other, I would have had to offer them Scriptural teaching concerning their sinful relationship. The same would have been true if John and Jane had revealed that they were living together out of wedlock.

God makes some people with homosexual tendencies, some claim, so God approves their sexual exercises. Do you really believe God makes some to be homosexual? Because some condition exists does not mean that God is the benevolent

designer of it. If God is its creator, then we would have to include all aberrations from the natural and normal as his approved work. That would include those born blind or deaf or paralytic or deformed. It would include those born with tendencies of addiction, sexual desire for children, kleptomaniacs, compulsive liars, over-sexed heterosexual persons, and all other people with abnormal or perverted tendencies.

God did make everything good in the beginning, but the fall of man in Adam opened the way for all that is abnormal and perverted. It is true that when God gave man the privilege of choice, he allowed sin which brought all that is undesirable. He permits these things but he does not send them upon innocent individuals. Contending that God designs these undesirable tendencies slanders him and approves irresponsible behavior.

Our correspondent quoted one Scripture reference (Matt. 19:11-12, not John 19. TEV). I am surprised that he quoted a passage in which Jesus stated "different reasons why men cannot marry: Some, because they were born that way." Two persons of the same gender, even though born homosexuals, cannot marry each other! Marriage would have to be redefined and perverted, and God's holy institution of the home would have to be destroyed to accommodate same-gender "marriage." This is not an equal rights issue any more than a demand one might make for "equal rights" to be both a husband and a wife at the same time. There is no such right. No man can claim the right to fill the role of a woman, and visa versa. That which works against the sanctity of the home violates the principle which God established and it must ever face his disfavor. It destroys the foundation on which God built civilized society.

Entertainers, talk show hosts and hostesses, and the media in general have added their voices, speaking as though they have theological credentials, to erase any stigma associated with homosexual practices. Teaching of "alternate lifestyles" has been pushed into our educational system. Because homosexuals have gained so much power, few public figures dare to speak critically of them. They inflate the statistics to indicate that a high percentage of the population is homosexual. They try to minimize the blame for the AIDS epidemic which lies so heavily upon them. With these developments, they have become a powerful political force which is able to stifle much opposition. This all makes it the more important that we continue to inform our children and the public of this immoral practice and to bring all offenders to Christ.

Our intention is to offer God's direction to troubled lives. But we cannot offer hope in Christ to anyone while encouraging the person to continue the lifestyle of his or her sin, whatever that sin might be. The child of God is not exempt from holy living. Being in Christ does not sanctify any sinful practice.

There are many inequities in this wicked world. Happiness is not found in lamenting the hand dealt to us, but in accepting our limitations and using in humble service what God has given us. Through this realization, some who might seem to have the most to complain about are the happiest. Sexual expression is not the only door to happiness. It is sad that many who have looked for happiness through its entrance have found it a vain disappointment.

It is the homosexual partnership that is rightly rejected and condemned, even as the male-female partnership without marriage should be rejected and condemned because is continued adultery. Even though the grace of God is available to all, it is not accessible to the person who has no intention of ceasing sinful practices. God does reject such persons.

Christians should humbly inform them of God's will and encourage them to overcome. []

HOOK'S POINTS

It is unlikely that God is concerned with our calendars denoting segments of our existence. We measure out days, weeks, and years because life is not static. As we begin 1997, let us review some things that can be measured by statistics. They are not spiritual measurements, however.

In the year since Vic Phares created our Web Page, 16,524 "hits" have been made on it. Here is a list of the pages accessed most in December.

Home Page	2491
Belly Button Controversy	627
Chat Room	538
Recycling God's Love	360
Free To Change, Ch. 27	292
Free In Christ, Table of Contents	234
Free To Change, " " "	232
Message Board	229
Homosexuality & Christian	200
What's New	195
Links to Other Sites	186
I Permit Not A Woman, Contents	182
Our Heritage, Ch. 1	182
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What I Hear From You, June 96	141
Biography of Cecil Hook	129
Edward Fudge Collection	129
When You Outgrow Your Church	124

During December we sent out 86 free copies of *Free In Christ*, making a total of 2,057 for 1996 and 26,442 since our beginning. You have made that possible by your donations. For each book given free, I reclaim \$1.00. That does not cover printing costs, but you pay the postage on books I sell. Even though printing costs for all my books have increased drastically, I still have not increased the prices. A single copy requires \$1.24 postage plus an envelope or mailer.

Generous year-end contributions have raised our working fund to \$4,395.61! You have allowed me to use your donations at my discretion. At the beginning, I used them only for free distribution of *Free In Christ*. Soon I began giving other books free as I saw fit. Then I let you pay for all expenses and equipment needed in operation of this ministry. Your partnership enables our mailout, *Freedoms' Ring*. When I went online, I let you pay all expenses for that extension of outreach. Now the ministry has taken on a whole new, awesome dimension –

the World Wide Web. So far, we have had a free ride on the web.

Vic Phares has put many hours and much dedication into it at no cost to us. His employer in Shreveport, Softdisk, has carried our site at no charge. I am going to send Vic money to purchase some software that he can use to enhance our page. It is also possible that Softdisk may no longer be able to carry our site. We would then pay for this service. That's no big expense and will be no strain on our working fund.

Due to my more constricting circumstances, and as the ministry continues to demand more of me, I am going to pay for some help in putting out *Freedom's Ring*. And I am inviting those who cannot afford to buy my other books to let me supply them without charge. This would include students, preachers, missionaries, prisoners, persons in other countries, and others who would like to read the books but find it difficult to pay for them. In all of this, it is you working together that makes it possible. I interpret your generosity as meaning you would approve of this expanded ministry. Pray with me that God will give me ability to keep up my part of it.

Speaking of Vic Phares, we owe him much. God has sent the most capable and dedicated man for the job as webmaster. I wrote before of his dream of being our first *Cyberspace Missionary*. He still sees a worldwide field accessible on WWW. He has not given up on the thought of being a full-time worker in this kind of outreach. Who has the vision to join in support of him as he grasps this 21st Century opportunity? Think about it. Talk it over with others. Let us hear from you. E-mail him at <vic@freedomring.org>. Call at his home: 318-925-0531.

Eight pages were ready for final editing for FR 18. Some senile old fellow in the office clicked the wrong button and lost it! I reworked it into the four pages you received. Then my copier simply refused to cooperate. With technical help from Mira on the masthead and formatting, I hope to do better (including proofreading) this time. But in November I celebrated (maybe not the right word) the 39th anniversary of my 39th birthday. That, along with more demands within the household, will surely have its effect on my output. If I do not fill your orders properly, fail to respond to your inquiries, or slip up on any other matter, please call it to my attention. Some e-mail notes deserving a reply have been given a reply only to be returned. If you have not gotten a proper reply, please contact me by mail, or check your e-mail address.

Although she does not feel like being up much, Lea can move about the house some. With our help (the stumbling leading the stumbling) she goes to the assembly and out to eat on rare occasions. I am thankful that I am still able to help her, to keep the house, and do the cooking, though it distracts me from this kind of work. Her spatial-perceptual deficit is frustrating to her, yet she shows courage and patience.

Thank you who sent special greetings for the holidays. Lea has taken care of sending out our greetings in times past, but she can no longer write or concentrate to compose a note. So please consider FR as our greeting to you. Our holidays have been quiet and peaceful, and we have not been neglected.

You may hear from your preacher or read in the bulletins the disparagement of churches that have Christmas observances and "entertainment" of singing groups. I just wish that such critical persons could have been in our packed building the Sunday before Christmas to feel the powerful presentation of the story of Jesus' birth, along with wonderfully uplifting songs of praise by groups and the congregation. Who in his right mind could criticize such a powerful testimony?

Sunshades have not been a priority around here lately. In 1996 we have had over 63 inches of rain, and it is still raining now on New Year's Day! When it is dry, the soil here is brick-like, but when it is wet, it is almost like sand with little cohesion. So landslides come with the saturation. The fir trees are shallow-rooted and often have little stability in the wet soil, especially when they have not the protection of a grove. (There should be a preachment of sorts in there somewhere.)

You have heard that Intel has developed the computer that can perform a trillion functions per second. Well, I am smart enough to have a son-in-law, Paul Prince, who provided an integral part of the design for that! His work team produced it.

Recently, I saw a bumper sticker that claimed that women who seek equality with men have no ambition. I will say again, however, that no woman can ever claim to be equal to men until she can have a huge bald spot on the top of her head and still think she is good looking!

Freedom's Ring is free for the asking. You may choose to receive it by e-mail or regular mail. Some send names of other persons to receive it. If you do not wish to get it, please let me know so we can remove your name.

What I Hear From You

"Merry Christmas! Thought you might like to know I serve in a unique capacity. I am minister for Laguna Creek Church of Christ and Sierra Vista Christian Church. Both are small church plants. They are working together. Merger is not a thought at this time. However, each accepts the other as Christian. Maybe there is hope after all. The greatest obstacle we all face is fear. Only faith overcomes fear. Thank you for your work and for your courage. I think I am beginning to understand the price you have paid. No price is too great for freedom." -David Hill, <hill@softcom.net>

"Thank you for the wonderful line of letters. You will be happy to know that we have started a unity push through the Ministerial Alliance here in Eagle River, AK. We are working on a quarter page newspaper ad that starts out with bold print, 'THAT THEY MAY ALL BE ONE'. The piece is a map of our area with numbers on it and a list of the churches by number. The key is that we use one phone number. People call one number for information on any of the churches on the map. The secretary will be talking up the pluses of each congregation. Pray that it works." -Virgil Fiske. <fiske@alaska.net>.

"My background in the Church of Christ endears me to your ministry and your efforts. I know all too well of the legalism and dogmatism that you are trying to help dispel. God bless you in your continued efforts." -A123456@webtv.net>

"I stumbled on your page by accident. I am completely new at the internet but not new to your books. I have some of them which you sent to me a couple of years ago. Can you help me by spreading the word around that the congregation of which I am part of here in Belfast, Northern Ireland has been searching a long time (unsuccessfully) for a preacher or teacher to come over here to help us? Anyone who might like to come, either long term or just a short visit please get in touch through this E-mail address." -John, <user@jimmy.softnet.co.uk>

"Thank you so much for this website. It is wonderful. I wish more people in churches of Christ would read this material. The church in general, and especially churches of Christ, needs to rethink a lot of things, and this material is a great start." -Greg Fielder <fielder@cei.net>

"Haven't you ever prayed for a rat? I'm kidding, but sometimes our prayers may make as little sense as do those of persons who pray for a particular animal or the like. Those who chose to test the power of prayer by praying selectively for particular experimental rats may have had a better motive in praying than appears the surface." -Ray Downen, <missionoutreach@juno.com>

"As I was reminiscing about the last year, I was amazed all over again at how God's providence provides us with what we need. It was only a few years ago when I visited an old acquaintance in a little out-of-the-way town in North Alabama. As I was leaving he gave me a copy of *Free In Christ* by Cecil Hook, of whom I had never heard. I thought that a free book would not be worth all that much, but as I began reading I was overjoyed to find that someone had put into words many of the things that I had been thinking for the last several years. Because of that random visit and, being introduced to your other works, my life has become much richer. I am encouraged that there are many Christians 'breaking out.' There are many others in our congregations who agree with the basic premises of your works but do not have the opportunity to make their thoughts known. I have believed for a long time that most of our closed mindedness comes from our preachers rather than from the average member."-Philip Black, philipb@mont.mindspring.com>

"While serving in the Ministry right out of college (LCU), I came to the conclusion that the scriptures did not provide a blueprint on how to conduct a "Worship Service." Now that I'm a Banker, I wish I would have discovered you at a younger age. I have been so uplifted, edified and challenged to think by your Internet writings. May God continue to bless your ministry." Les, lpolvado@flash.net>

"I believe you ruin your entire page by just the simple statement you are not qualified to determine if sodomites are born that way

or not." -<dcog@host.cass.net>

"I appreciate your words on the subject of baptism. I get extremely tired of the constant discussions over this topic. I have not been in the coC all my life. I see the importance of this as others do, but to think that you automatically become this super Christian coming out of the water is scary. Your words truly convey what most scholars confer on baptism. Obedience. I pray we will move to this concept quickly and stop judging others on this subject." -Bill Althoff, <WillAltoff@aol.com>

LIBERATING BOOKS

Free In Christ - Cecil Hook ... \$4.00 (or Free)

Free To Speak - Cecil Hook ...\$4.00

Free As Sons - Cecil Hook ...\$5.00

Free to Change - Cecil Hook ...\$5.00

Free To Accept - Cecil Hook ...\$5.00

Our Heritage of Unity and Fellowship - writings of Carl Ketcherside & Leroy Garrett, Cecil Hook, Editor ...\$10.00

The Twisted Scriptures, Ketcherside...\$6.00

The Death of the Custodian, Ketcherside...\$5.00

The Fire That Consumes, Edward Fudge...\$13.00

Beyond the Sacred Page, Edward Fudge...\$9.00 (Out of stock)

"I Permit Not A Woman"..To Remain Shackled, Robert Rowland...\$9.95

The Stone-Campbell Movement, Leroy Garrett

Revised, expanded, 573 pages, hard cover. \$22.00 postpaid
(Please add \$1.50 for mailing orders under \$25.00 and figure your own payment.)

Web Site: <<http://www.freedomsring.org>>

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