

FREEDOM'S RING

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

Cecil & Lea Hook

17196 NW Woodmere Ct., Beaverton OR 97006-4820

503-690-0826; <hookc@teleport.com> <cecil@freedomring.org> <<http://www.freedomring.org>>

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Is Faith A Gift?

If you pass this up without reading it, I will understand, for you have long known that faith is not infused but that belief is developed through hearing God's message.

In spite of the simplicity of this process, we are noticing more speakers and writers all along teaching that faith is a gift. I have read no lengthy explanation of that claim, but it is just thrown out as a indisputable fact. However, two texts were given in support of the claim in a pamphlet I have just read, and the writer's use of them enabled me to see more clearly why he would seek to prove that faith is a gift.

The scholarly brother who wrote the booklet quoted Alexander Campbell's statement that "the popular belief of a regeneration previous to faith, or a knowledge of the gospel, is replete with mischief." Then he countered, "It remains a fact that faith is categorically stated to be a gift from God, not something originating from ourselves (Eph. 2:8-9). Further, faith is specifically said to be a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). If there is saving faith present in a person it is because he has been renewed by the Spirit. If sinful people can perform the most spiritually significant act (faith in Christ) without the Spirit, why would they need the Spirit for future spiritual acts?"

I shall not mention this brother by name because I am dealing with ideas rather than contending with him. In view of the many plain references concerning how faith originates, why would he strain these passages to make his point? His reason becomes evident as he proceeds to dissociate baptism from salvation. Paul wrote, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God – not because of works, lest any man should boast." The writer of the pamphlet rules out baptism because it is a work of "our own doing." Accepting that, he would have to rule out faith and repentance as things of "our own doing" also, and he does.

How could anything as simple as baptism be thought to have merit? It is easy to be baptized. One is passive in that act, and it is done once for all. However, believing and changing one's life are much more difficult, and faith must be nourished continually. So, if we are thinking of works of merit, faith and repentance would stand to be vastly more meritorious than baptism.

How is the requirement for these actions by man circumvented? By making all three become gifts and emphasizing the total sovereignty of God over the will and soul of man. According to this brother, God gives the faith to whom he chooses, and those to whom he gives the faith, his Spirit regenerates by a baptism of the Spirit on that believer at the same time. By his sophisticated logic, he limited baptism to an act of the Spirit and, by his rationalizations evaporated the water from baptism before the reader's eyes. So, since

salvation is all God's own doing, it leaves no room for man to do anything.

This assumption would be believable if the first Europeans who explored the American continents had found regenerated believers here already. Since God shows no partiality, all the natives would have been believers already, thus precluding the need for missionaries to preach the gospel to them.

Does the text quoted say categorically (absolutely) that faith is a gift? Which is Paul writing about – salvation, or the condition of receiving it? He is writing of our salvation, explaining that it is not of our own works, but accepting it by faith is of our own doing.

Rather than twisting this passage to make it mean what we want, it is better to let Paul speak more on the subject. Just for one setting, let us scan Romans 10. Paul expressed his grief at the disbelief of the Jews. Why not rather express grief that God had not given them faith? Throughout their history, God had been trying to create faith in them. He writes, "For Christ is the end of the law, that everyone who has faith may be justified." (Not "everyone whom God has given faith is justified.")

In the second paragraph, "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith which we preach); because if you **confess** with your lips that Jesus is Lord and **believe** in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Confession, another work of our own doing, is required also. Notice that no hint is given that this is a partial, elective action of God. "The scripture says, 'No one who believes in him will be put to shame.' For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. For, 'everyone who **calls** upon the name of the Lord will be saved.' Calling on the Lord is another necessary action.

Must God infuse faith before they can call? "But how are men to **call** upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never **heard**? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news!' But they have **not all heeded** the gospel; for Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has **believed what he has heard** from us?' So **faith comes from what is heard**, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ." Paul is clear on how we come to believe.

In his commission, Jesus did not say, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He whom God gives faith and thus regenerates by his Spirit shall be saved." (Mark 16:16). On Pentecost many convicted believers cried out, "Brethren, what shall we do?" Peter did not tell them there was nothing to do because God had already remitted their sins when he gave them convicting faith (Acts 2:38). When the Philippian jailer asked, "Men, what must I do to be

saved?" Paul did not answer, "There is nothing you can do. God must give you faith" (Act 16:31). The Lord did not give Lydia faith but "opened her heart to **give heed** to what was said by Paul. And when she was baptized..." (Acts 16:14f). She obeyed the gospel. Paul wrote that the Lord will be revealed from heaven "inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (2 Thes. 1:7-9

Baptism in Water

All of the "spiritualizing" that we can do cannot dissociate water from the new birth or from baptism. Jesus still says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). After hearing the gospel, the Ethiopian eunuch said, "See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?" (Acts 8:37), and the Spirit-filled Philip proceeded to immerse him in the water. After God had confirmed by Holy Spirit baptism that Gentiles would be accepted, Peter declared, "Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (Acts 10:44) And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. At this point it was admitted, "To the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18). God granted Gentiles the same means of access that Jews enjoyed.

This misconceived avoidance of any action in receiving forgiveness of sins is a sort of entry by the back door into a perceived absolute sovereignty of God to choose, save, and activate us. Due to man's depravity, it is claimed, he is dead in sin, and dead persons can initiate no action that would reach out to God. That would mean that God must regenerate the person at His own will.

To say the least, that confuses metaphors. The dead person, unable to act, is regenerated. Then the regenerated, live person is buried in baptism because he is dead in sin (Rom. 6:3-4; Col. 2:11f)!

Our text (Eph. 2:1-9) indicates that we were dead because of our own trespasses and sins. Yes, all of us became helpless in our sinful state when we committed our first sin. We were and are unable to contribute anything whatsoever toward the remitting of those sins. We cannot take one step toward God, if by that we mean to offer him something of merit or which obligates him to save us. However, even pagans may seek to find God like groping blind men (Acts 17:27), and some "show that what the law requires is written on their hearts" (Rom. 2:14-16). The only work of merit was done by Christ so that the gift of forgiveness is accessible. God chose to dispense that gift to those who believe, and he has worked to create that faith through the Good News, the Gospel, as is outlined in Romans 10 as we viewed above.

God's initiative action is revealed by Jesus. "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me **draws** him..." His next words reveal how that is done: "It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all **be taught** by God.' Every one who **has heard and learned** from the Father **comes to me**" (John 6:44f). We are called through the gospel by which the regenerative work of the Spirit begins and develops. "You have been born anew, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding **word** of God ... That word is the **good news** which was preached to you" (1 Peter 1:23, 25). Jesus further explained, "It is the **spirit that gives life**, the flesh is of no avail; the **words** that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (John 6:63). This is consistent with Jesus' desire that the gospel be preached to

every creature with the promise that whoever believes it and is baptized shall be saved.

In this Jesus calls for willing actions of acceptance (not works of merit) in order to receive the offered salvation. In our flight from efforts of legal or achieved righteousness, we must not go to the extreme of excluding our responsibility for real commitment, obedience, and living in a sustained spiritual relationship.

Life does not originate in the delivery room or in the waters of baptism. In a figure, Jesus spoke of baptism to Nicodemus as a birth of the water and the Spirit, both of which are part of the new birth process. Like a physical conception, life is conceived by faith, but a development finalizing in baptism is necessary for the completed birth. Just as a delivery in birth is necessary for confirming, finalizing, and changing of relationship of physical life, so the birth of the Spirit must involve coming forth in baptism. All conceived life does not reach that state.

This is all consistent with baptism being a prerequisite to being in Christ, being in the one body (which is the church), being born again, being regenerated, being a child of God, being raised with Christ to newness of life, being saved, having sins remitted, and being reconciled to God (Relate these passages: Rom. 6:3-4; Gal. 3:26f; 1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 4:4; Col. 1:18; Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16; Mk 16:16; 2 Cor. 5:17-19; John 3:3-5.) Faith changes the heart, repentance changes the life, and baptism changes the relationship.

In relating these teachings to the manner in which we access grace by faith, we are not supporting the concept of baptismal regeneration. Neither our response by believing or by a ritual have regenerative powers. Neither contribute anything to the gracious offer of salvation through Christ. But both are actions of acceptance in response to the offer of grace. Faith that does not respond is ineffective, yet neither the faith nor the response is a work that contributes to salvation. They simply access the gift.

Accepting the Gift

Lea and I were living independently in a house in Tigard. Paul and Mira Prince, our son-in-law and daughter, bought a large house in Beaverton which has an adjoining apartment especially to provide us a permanent and free residence with them. There were no obligations on our part to pay purchase price or rent. It was all grace, their most loving provision for us. Believing that they had provided this residence for us would not have benefited us if we had taken no action. There had to be an acceptance and cooperation for it to be of benefit to us. We could have refused to "forsake all" of the Tigard residence and move. Moving our furniture into the new residence was essential, but it in no way contributed to paying any part of the cost of the house. If a sense of appreciation for what our children have done for us moves us to express thanks and love to them, to tell others of their great gift, or to work about the place in beautifying or repairing it, those actions would be no effort to pay for the house or to repay the gift. Now that we are enjoying the gift, we could forfeit it at any time by moving out of the apartment or by burning it down.

In similar manner, God's grace is offered to all. Jesus paid it all. If we could own the whole world, none of us would have one penny of merit to offer to buy back our lost soul, as though Christ's payment were insufficient. But we must accept it. Believing without any action of acceptance as prescribed by the Giver will not benefit us. If faith fails before it brings the proper response of acceptance, it is dead faith, not saving faith. In fact, faith has no more power to save than

baptism or anything else we accomplish. God saves through Jesus Christ. It is totally by grace.

Some words can be used in a simple sense or with a more comprehensive meaning. In one sense, *faith* can mean nothing more than intellectual acceptance, but effective faith is more comprehensive in meaning. It includes mental acceptance and activity resulting from the conviction. As it relates to salvation, *faith* always has the comprehensive meaning, or it is *dead*.

In our language one of the common literary devices used is the *metonymy*. A metonymy is a figure of associated ideas in which the whole is put for the part, the part for the whole, the container for the thing contained, as substance for the thing made of it, or one thing put for another closely associated with it. Here, let us consider the part being put for the whole. Jesus explained that his Golden Rule "is the law and the prophets." It only epitomized the message of the law and the prophets. When James defined pure religion as visiting the needy and living morally clean lives, he was abridging the definition the definition by putting a part for the whole.

Our salvation is attributed to various sources like God, Christ, grace, the gospel, faith, works, confession, repentance, baptism, and faithfulness. When our salvation is attributed to any one of these, the other factors are not meant to be excluded. The part is put for the whole in order to emphasize a certain factor being considered. Failure to recognize this opens the way for selective theology, with systems being built upon emphasis of single, or selective, concepts.

One of the problems we have, in my estimation, is that **works** has become a loaded theological term. Any **action** on our part has come to mean a **work of merit or achievement**. When Paul wrote that it is **not of works**, he was not implying that no action is involved, for he made faith a condition, and believing is an active response. If faith were simply a state of mind instead of an active response, it still would be dead, for faith without works is dead.

This distinction in the nature of works is evident in our text under consideration: "*and it is not your own doing, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*" We are not brought into a regenerated life to be monuments but to be active in doing good works.

Another loaded term is whether baptism or any other obedient response is **essential to salvation**. If we mean, is it necessary in order to **complete the atonement**, the answer would be absolutely not! No work or action is "man's part" to add to "God's part" in saving us. But when we ask if baptism or any other obedient response is **essential to accepting salvation**, that is an entirely different matter, and the answer is a resounding "yes!" Meeting Christ's conditions of acceptance are neither an achievement or meritorious, else faith would be ruled out.

Good Works

No, they do not add anything to the purchase price of the atonement any more than my fixing a dripping faucet in my apartment helps to pay for it. Are such good works of any consequence in determining our eternal welfare? Without question, they are, for we are unable to sweep away all of the warnings, exhortations, teachings, and commands that urge us to dedicated service until the end. The author of our text concerning grace also wrote, "*For we must all appear before*

the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done" (2 Cor. 5:10; also Rom. 2:1-11). This is a reinforcement of the judgment scene depicted by Jesus in Matthew 25:31-46. As disciples, we can dedicate ourselves to do good or evil, and if an evil life is rewarded as good, the many exhortations and warnings become meaningless.

Jesus inserted a conditional **if**: "*if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses*" (Matt. 6:15). In his most comforting assurance, John inserts an **if** also: "*if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin*" (1 John 1:7). Jesus provided an infinite source of forgiveness, or *treasury of merit*, to borrow a Catholic term. However, it is not applied to individual sins until they are committed and dealt with to bring the continual cleansing. Stumbling is not like the rejection and impenitence dealt with in Hebrews 6:4f: "*For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt.*" As we have discussed in previous essays, this is no demand for perfection (which would be meritorious), but this requires a life of continued relationship and commitment to Christ.

So there is exhortation to be led by the Spirit in order to bear the fruit of the Spirit, yet this cannot be interpreted in a manner to evade the consequence of our misconduct by saying that the fruits of the Spirit are gifts bestowed upon us. Good conduct is not a gift.

In this rambling essay, I have shared my beliefs and convictions. In good conscience, I cannot advise otherwise. However, I am pleased to let God be God with the prerogative to dispense his grace as he wishes and to make exceptions as he chooses. Also, I am willing to let you answer to him according to your beliefs and convictions without binding mine upon you.

Is faith a gift? Yes, but in a different context. In listing the manifestations of the Spirit given to each disciple, Paul includes "*the measure of faith which God has assigned him*" (1 Cor. 12:3-8; Compare Romans 12:3-6; 1 Cor. 13:2; Matt. 17:20; 20:21; Mk. 11:22f; 4:23). These manifestations were not given to regenerate anyone but were given to disciples for the common good of the body of Christ as they serve God.

Frankly, I do not know the nature of this gift exactly. I have read no explanations which clarify it beyond question. The context is Chapter 13 where Paul continues his thoughts about spiritual gifts and includes, "*If I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.*" There is no evidence that the Spirit has endowed anyone with that gift. At least, we have no video of it. And if you did remove a mountain, the environmentalists would have you arrested! As spectacular as that manifestation of the Spirit would be, it would be childish in comparison to mature love, Paul assures us in that chapter.

No one has ever come upon the simple answer to all doctrinal questions. Lest salvation be granted on the merit of scholarship, we have confidence that those who hold simpler concepts will suffer no loss because of it. In simplicity we can still accept John's concluding words: "*Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe*

that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30f). []

Servants and Surrogates

For some time I have been intending to raise some questions and throw out some different concepts about congregational organization. I am confident that my readers will accept some challenges of our traditional concepts and practices without becoming too defensive, for you know I am not trying to make law of my opinions. Without constant reappraisal in all things, we can allow tradition to become law. In their commitment to know and do the will of God fully, some respected men among the Baptists have been reevaluating the Biblical role of elders. While we join in applauding their spirit, can we also demonstrate such a spirit of restudy among ourselves?

Do we have a rigid pattern for organization of God's people? The gospel is the power of God for salvation (Rom. 1:16). It is the message of salvation through the atonement of Jesus, not a message of salvation through properly organized religion. On Pentecost, "there were added that day about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41). They were added to one another as the summation of the saved in one body, yet this adding them together was not necessarily organizing them. In subsequent days, "The Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved" (2:47). We can be assured that the Lord is still doing that. Congregational organization is not mentioned in that early setting.

In their association for worship and service, how were, and are, the saved people to be organized? If a certain form of congregational operation were essential to our salvation, then surely it would be outlined in detail and enjoined. Some instructions and precedents are seen in the New Testament writings, yet no universal application is demanded, nor are they made to be life-or-death matters. It seems that appointment of persons to carry out certain activities relating to the group was always a matter of expediency rather than a matter of conforming to a specified pattern. In spite of this, some groups have devised their own methods of government by which they claim identity as the one, true church.

All disciples are servants of the Lord but not necessarily servants of the church. One does not need appointment and approval by others in order to exercise the gifts God has given him or her as long as it is a private ministry. All disciples are not servants of the congregation. The church selects (approves, ordains, appoints) those who serve the needs of the group, some being designated as elders and deacons, and others to service as teachers, preachers, song leaders, secretaries, youth directors, incorporation trustees, and such like.

Through the inaccurate translation of some words, we have been led to think of elders and deacons being appointed to authoritative, organizational offices. Pastoring, shepherding, overseeing, feeding, tending, ruling (by example and leadership rather than authority), are all more functional than official. Those ordained to such works are called elders (presbyters), overseers (bishops). *Supervisor* is a synonym, and pastors (shepherds tending the flock).

We have transliterated the Greek word *diakonos* into *deacon*, attaching a special meaning to it to make it an office instead of a function. But the word means *servant, minister*. **So anyone appointed to serve the group is a deacon, servant, and minister of the association of disciples.** That includes our traditional elders and deacons.

Here we face a tricky situation. Many who serve the group, like teachers, pulpit ministers, youth ministers, and counselors do the elders and deacons are chosen to do. But we do not call them elders or deacons because they fill a function rather than an office. They become surrogates of the servant elders performing their functions! Is something out of joint here? Officers may delegate responsibility, but can servants delegate their function to surrogates? I am asking, not answering!

Surrogates of Servants

There is an inherent tension between elders and preachers (as we commonly designate pulpit teachers) that comes from a deeper source than interpersonal relationships. The preacher becomes a surrogate of the elders, chosen by them to do their work of teaching, tending, and pastoring in general. He becomes their mouthpiece obligated to project their aims and purposes. He is educated and trained beyond their expertise but cannot lead any further than their concepts, if it "rocks the boat." While he fills an "up front" role generally perceived as authoritative, the elders exercise authority over him. They control his financial security.

Perhaps, much of our respect for congregational autonomy has come from our historical associations with the Baptists. They appropriately cherish that concept of church government. Most likely to our disadvantage, we have rejected two features that they have embraced. While jealously guarding congregational autonomy, they have associated for the common good with other congregations in a Convention on a voluntary basis. The Convention is not permitted to control the congregation, however. The other feature is the congregational operation with a pastor, or pastors, and a board of deacons.

Yes, I am aware that such a suggestion may be met with some alarm, but please don't stampede yet. Baptists have given a more general interpretation to the "qualifications" of elders which we have considered more as legal requirements. They sometimes choose pastors who may be young and have no believing children. These are given the charge to shepherd, tend, and feed the flock, leaving the general functioning of the congregation in the hands of the deacons. We choose young men also but we deny that they can be pastors (elders). Although Baptists seldom use the term *elder*, (we seldom use the term *pastor or bishop*), their pastor, or pastors, serve in that capacity. That avoids the surrogate role. He serves in an appointed role rather than in doing the work of other servants. In this definition of function, he is accountable to the congregation, doing the work the church assigned him.

Last year when I first thought to write about this, I made some inquiries of Houston Hook, a cousin who is pastor of a Baptist church in Millsap, Texas. He sent me an article from the Baptist Standard (May 21, 1997) which told of their restudy of Biblical elders. Some different views are offered, but generally Baptists have held (and still hold) to the pastor-and-deacons concept, with the understanding that the pastor and elder are the same.

In a note to me, Houston expressed a stimulating thought that had never come to my mind. He wrote, "I personally have thought of elders as being mature, wise leaders instead of an official office in the church, and when the Bible mentions *ordaining elders*, I considered it to mean the ordaining of mature, wise leaders to the ministry of preaching, evangelism, or missions, etc." I suppose that I should not have been surprised at such an insightful, challenging idea, for we Hooks are all smarter than most people! ☺

We don't speak of *ordaining* a preacher. In a more crass manner, we speak of *hiring* him, or in more pleasing manner of *engaging* him. Ordaining, or appointing, and supporting one who is already recognized as spiritually mature to the function of shepherding/evangelizing would be in harmony with Paul's instructions, "*Let elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching; for the scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain,' and 'The laborer deserves his wages' (1 Tim. 5:17f).*" This, at least, offers some suggestion that not all mature, wise men (elders) are expected to function as preachers and teachers who feed the flock.

Original Elders

The Jerusalem church began under the supervision of the apostles, but few would claim that apostles are parts of a pattern for today. In the Scriptures no mention is made of selection of the elders in the Jerusalem church, however, they soon come into view. As heads of families in their patriarchal culture, elders are of ancient origin among the Hebrews. Elders are mentioned in the gospels, they being honorable heads of families, members of the Sanhedrin, and community leaders recognized among the Jews. Since selection of elders is not mentioned, we may assume that some of the Jewish elders were converted and continued to receive that recognition. It was later, and outside of Judea among those unfamiliar with the Jewish concept and cultural practice, that "qualifications," or descriptions, of these men were given. Those Jewish elders were the kind of persons to be appointed to serve churches. The New Covenant writers favored the term *elder*, possibly because of its historic usage among the Jews.

Before mention is made of elders in Jerusalem, seven men were chosen by the church for a special service to the disciples. Were they ordained to an office or a function, or both? Whether they were appointed for indefinite tenure or for the filling of one need is not clarified. Later, other servants who met certain "qualifications" were appointed outside of Judea. It is not revealed if they composed a standing committee awaiting assignments to fill needs as they arose, or if each was selected for a function which might be terminated by its completion. It seems more expedient that each was chosen to exercise his gifts and abilities in certain functions to which his service was limited.

Those who seek to follow patterns today insist that a plurality of elders and a body of deacons are identifying marks of the true church, though the scriptures nowhere teach that. If that were true, a congregation would have to begin with elders and deacons, and converts would be added to them. Small groups with only novice male converts could not be identified with the true church.

Patternists insist on nothing more or less than a plurality of elders and deacons in each church. Few, if any, congregations hold to that pattern. They organize their work into departments, assigning them to individuals and committees. They choose trustees for legal incorporation. They choose song leaders, youth directors, secretaries, and maintenance personnel. They appoint, or hire, surrogate men and women to do the elder's work of teaching and shepherding the flock. They justify their actions by making a distinction between offices and functions. According to the (il)logic, elders and deacons may hold the offices while others who are not qualified to hold the offices perform their functions. Did we lose the thread of reality somewhere there?

Traditional Concepts

During most of my career, several traditional concepts limited any expansion of my understanding of this matter. Non-defensive review in later years, however, brought to view possibilities that I would not have considered earlier. I will mention some of them briefly below. You may read more about them in *Free In Christ*, Chapters 6, 22, 23, 24 and in *Freedom's Ring*, No. 13 and 14. These are available in print and at our website.

Assuming that you are familiar with the references to elders and deacons, I have not been noting them in this essay. However, for your convenience I will list a number of them here: 1 Timothy 3; Titus 1; 1 Peter 5:1-4; Acts 14:23; Ephesians 4:11; 1 Timothy 5:17. Your concordance will give a more general listing of the words used.

Plurality of elders and deacons in each congregation is still emphasized among us. It is true that every mention of them is plural. In Acts 14:23, it is said that Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church. That is an indefinite expression, however. To say that in the last election, for example, we elected governors in every state would not be understood to mean that we elected a plurality of governors in each state. "Elders in every city" (Titus 1:5) is not equivalent to "elders in every congregation" for there might be many congregations in a given city. In Jerusalem elders were always mentioned in the plural but the church is always mentioned as singular, yet we know that there were "house churches" in Jerusalem. These many congregational groups comprised the church there. Whether each house church had elders, or a corporate group of elders served them all, is unknown. As an illustrated usage of the terminology, "Husbands, love your wives" (Eph. 5:25) neither obligates a man to love a plurality of wives nor for a wife to have a plurality of husbands. No objection is being offered for having a plurality, but I am objecting to the binding of it as a legal pattern.

Precedent may indicate an acceptable course without demanding it as a universally necessary pattern. For any group to perform any corporate activity, appointment of persons to carry out the activity is expedient, if not necessary. However, groups may operate for many years without having qualified males to fill the traditional office of elder or deacon.

Office or function? A man who is thirty years old and has no wife and believing children cannot qualify as an elder to shepherd / pastor the flock, we have always contended strongly. But we have had no objection to his being a surrogate elder, shepherding the flock! He cannot be one, but we can hire him to do the work of one! Not only is that an inconsistency of legalism, it is an admission that we make the role of an elder an office rather than a function.

Women, likewise, we have refused to appoint to be deacons, but she is appointed to function in roles of teaching, nurturing, and congregational service in general which traditionally are supposed to be the functions of elders and deacons. Again, that is a misguided concept of office instead of function. Elders and deacons are appointed to service, not to fill some authoritative office listed on the church letterhead. The difference between elders and deacons lies in the area in which they are to be selected to function. Every appointee is a servant of the group and should not be appointed without due consideration since he or she is functioning with the approval of the church (1 Tim.5:22). But what about the authority of these congregational representatives?

Authority: who has it? No person, or group of persons, has authority over your soul. None can make rules for God or bind their interpretations thinking they are

spokesmen for God. The word generally translated *rule* in 1 Timothy 5:17 is not a word expressing authority, but it means *to stand before, to lead, to attend to*. Elders should do that. When authority is exercised by a body of elders who also select any new ones to be added, they become lords over the flock (1 Peter 5:3), and church autonomy is lost to presbyterian or episcopal rule.

There is another facet to authority. Any body of people can authorize others to function for them, even as we elect public servants for that purpose. And the authority lies in the corporate group, rather than an appointee. A congregation cannot make rules for God. A congregation may authorize persons to organize, supervise, teach, publish a bulletin, lead singing, or paint. The appointee's authority extends no further than the function.

Extended service. I was always taught that the service of an elder is limited to the congregation that appoints him. If we are speaking of an office or authority, that would be a reasonable assumption. However, if we are referring to function, who can limit his ministering to the spiritual needs of any who are brought to his attention? Although I was never designated as an elder while feeding and shepherding, I have served more than one congregation at the same time regularly. When we are free of that *authority* concept for shepherding, it puts things in a different light. Our service knows no parochial boundaries.

"Qualifications": Are Paul's descriptions of elders sent to Timothy and Titus lists of legal requirements or general descriptions? Were different requirements made of those to be appointed by Timothy and Titus? If they were legal check-lists, then each man would have needed both lists. There is considerable variation between the two lists the men were to work from. We try to combine them today, but Timothy was in Ephesus and Titus was in Crete, and they could not have done that. However each man could see that Paul wanted them to choose wise, spiritually mature, honorable men similar to the elders of Jewish culture.

Unless we are predisposed to look for limiting patterns, we see more clearly that no real pattern of organization is specified which, when disregarded, would jeopardize the souls of all within the church. Flexibility allows for the use of judgment of any group to determine what is most effective and expedient for its own particular needs. Most of us will agree, for example, that a church may appoint a building committee or minister search committee even though there is no pattern for such organized groups. Since the composition, culture, and capabilities within various churches around the world are not identical, why try to force a rigid pattern on their operation? It is by their function, not fitting an organizational mold, that they serve God's purposes.

By their continued usage, terms develop traditional meanings. This has happened to our common designations of *pastor, elder, preacher, minister, deacon, and servant*. Would we not do well to *translate* those designations into terms of modern usage? Persons, without regard to gender, can be appointed to areas of service in which they are gifted and be given designations that describe their function. We might use terms like *supervisors, project leaders, care-givers, counselors, pulpit teachers* – well, you can be more creative than I am at this moment. We can use terms that do not reflect "holy organization" or authoritarian rule. *Function is the key!*

In our modern culture, we think in terms of organization, definition of power, and jurisdiction. Because of our mobile society, it is difficult to think of certain men coming

to be respected as elders as they did in ancient Jewish culture without being elected. So we specify these men by appointment, not to qualify them, but for recognition of them as approved leaders.

Perhaps I should have a more definite and conclusive bottom line for this disjointed piece. My aim is to urge openness for new considerations rather than for simply defending traditional practices. []

HOOK'S POINTS

Starting from scratch January 1, 1996, our home page has had over 50,000 unique visitors through March with 2200 from 47 countries during the month. The average day had 682 hits for all pages within the site including Edward Fudge's articles and all the books hosted at Freedom's Ring. Many hits in the last figure are by "web robots" with no people viewing, so we cannot know how many people stopped to view. Any way we measure it, though, it is awesome! God is using his untiring servant, Vic Phares, to expand our outreach with exciting speed. However, we are not in cyberspace alone, for I read recently that there are an estimated 320 million web sites on the World Wide Web.

A loving brother in Florida has distributed 100 copies of *Free In Christ* in his visits with other congregations. In March I sent him another 100 books. You are a partner in this ministry when you pass the books along or tell others about them. We still can provide free copies of FIC for distribution. I have told you of Dr. Prasad in India who has distributed numerous books to other physicians, preachers, and training school teachers. Books are treasured there. In March I sent him another assortment of 115 books. Gifts from you who support this work.

Telugu Translation: Dr. Prasad has asked my permission to translate *Free In Christ* into the Telugu language for use in India. Of course, I am thrilled at the thought of it. He will be assisted by Dr. G. Blessing Sam Chand. It is not likely that he will have funding to publish the material. He does not even have a vehicle for use as he goes to various areas preaching.

Spanish Translation: Robert Acosta continues his work of translating FIC into Spanish. I gave a wrong e-mail address last time. If you wish to help him, contact him at <ACOSTA2@aol.com>, (818)-367-7800, or 15640 Larkspur St., Sylmar, CA 91432.

Freedom's Ring is free. Send mail subs to me. Send e-mail subs to <freedom@freedomring.org>. If you receive it and no longer care to, please let us know. Over 900 receive it by e-mail now.

Was your order for books filled properly? Due to *Old Timer's Disease*, I become confused more readily. So please call my attention to any oversights. (Do oversights make one an overseer? ☺)

Your calls are enjoyed. If you call repeatedly only to get a busy signal, that does not mean that I am conversing with someone. My computer is on my phone line, and that keeps it tied up when I am online.

Sacred Page: Your numerous orders for Edward Fudge's *Beyond The Sacred Page* have convinced me that I did the right thing in accepting the publication of Edward's great testimony of how God has worked in his life. \$9.00 each plus \$1.50 postage on orders under \$25.00.

Public testimonials of faith by athletes and entertainers, courageous as they may be, do not always express the best theology. Does the end-zone homage to God indicate that God loves the victor more than the defeated? Are athletic victories evidence of faith and divine approval? When Oprah, like other entertainers, gives her testimony of faith in

God while living with a man without wedlock, does she really honor God? Madonna professes spirituality as she chooses to bear a child outside of marriage. Entertainers become theologians whose voices are louder than the pulpit due to their popularity. John the Baptist is barely audible these days. Whose voices do your children hear?

"The true worship, the really spiritual worship, is the offering of one's body, and all that one does every day with it, to God. Real worship is not the offering of elaborate prayers to God; it is not the offering to God of a liturgy, however noble, and ritual, however magnificent. Real worship is the offering of every-day life to God. Real worship is not something which is transacted in a church; real worship is something which sees the whole world as the temple of the living God, and every common deed an act of worship." -William Barclay, (Rom. 12:1).

THE SPIRIT: Indwelt Deity

Brother Given Blakely

For centuries the professed church has been divided in its view of the Holy Spirit. For some, He is at the heart of the Kingdom. For others, He is a non-entity for our time. Both positions are wrong. In fact, these two extremes represent efforts to avoid error rather than efforts to appropriate truth.

You will find very little in Scripture about the Holy Spirit Himself. It is His work that is primary in the revelation of Him. You must see this in contrast to what is said of the Father and the Son. We are told considerable about the Father: His qualities, purpose, loves, and hates. His role in salvation is a particular emphasis in Scripture. Even more time is spent delineating the Son to us. We are told of Him volunteering to come and do the Father's will (Heb. 10:9). Significant detail is provided concerning the involvements of Him becoming a man (Phil. 2:5-8). Remarkable details are provided concerning His earthly ministry. His present activity is expounded, together with His imminent return.

But we do not have this sort of detail about the Holy Spirit. I am going to venture a bold statement, knowing that some will recoil when they read it. We do not have enough information about the Spirit Himself to worship Him. While we read of the Gospel of God (Rom. 1:1; 15:16; 2 Cor. 11:7; 1 Thess. 2:2,8,9; 1 Pet. 4:17) and the Gospel of Christ (Rom. 1:16; 15:19, 29; 1 Cor. 9:12; 2 Cor. 4:4; Phil. 1:27), we never read of the Gospel of the Spirit. Repeated references are made to holy men preaching Christ, but nowhere do we read of men preaching the Spirit. Such considerations are arresting, particularly when we find prominent religious men proclaiming the Spirit above Jesus. Be assured that the Holy Spirit was not sent to upstage the Savior. The fact that He has been so presented only confirms the spiritual threat of the environment in which we find ourselves.

Some will charge me with not believing in the work of the Spirit, but this is an imagination. Others will say that men of God did preach the Spirit, citing references such as Romans 8, Galatians 4, and others, to support their statement. I AM NOT saying holy men did not say anything about the Holy Spirit. What I am saying is this: when the Holy Spirit inspired men to write concerning what was preached, he said they "preached Christ," "the Kingdom of God," "repentance and remission of sins," "the Gospel," "the cross of Christ," and "the Word." But it is never said that they "preached the Spirit"—NEVER!

He was not the subject of their preaching, but the Worker who brought the preaching home to the heart, convicting and persuading men of the truth.

The point here is that the indwelling of the Spirit is not an end of itself. It is what He DOES that is the point. Spiritually uninformed people have made RECEIVING the Spirit the point. The Word of God makes WHAT HE DOES WITHIN the point. That may seem like a technicality, but it is not. The indwelling Spirit is the appointed means to the realization of God's will within you. This is what makes you able to do His pleasure. It is what empowers you to overcome a world destined for fire.

Several hundred years before Jesus, God revealed His purpose. He was going to put His Spirit in His people. This was a revolutionary thought to the ancients. Ezekiel proclaimed it with remarkable clarity. "And I shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: then shall ye know that I the LORD have spoken it, and performed it, saith the LORD." (Ezek 37:14). "And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them" (Ezek 36:27). Observe that putting His Spirit within was not the real point. Rather, it was the result of that action. "And ye shall live" . . . "and cause you to walk in My statutes, and ye shall keep my judgements and do them." This parallels Jeremiah's prophecy of the new covenant. (Jer. 31:31-34). Later, the Spirit revealed that this referred to the covenant we have in Christ (Heb. 8:10-13; 10:16). The indwelling Spirit is the appointed means to the realization of God's purpose within you.

"In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. (But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Spirit was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified)" (John 7:37-39). The uniqueness of the day of salvation, together with the restrictions of the day prior to it, are here revealed. Until Jesus was glorified, the Spirit could not be "given" as He is today. That means that Moses, the holy prophets, and even David, did not have the Spirit like those in Christ. He did not indwell them as He does those in the Son. It is not that they were less qualified than we. In fact, person to person, they stood far above most of us. In their day, sin had not been "put away" (Heb. 9:26). This prohibited the giving of the Spirit as is now realized.

"And we are his witnesses of these things; and so is also the Holy Spirit, whom God hath given to them that obey Him." (Acts 5:32). It is important to note the relation of the Holy Spirit to obedience. This is obedience in its initial or primary sense. The reference is to our beginning obedience to the Gospel. Peter referred to it as repenting and being baptized (Acts 2:38). Jesus called it believing and being baptized (Mark 16:16). Paul referred to it as believing on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 16:31). He also called it being baptized into Christ and putting on Christ (Gal. 3:27), and being "baptized into His death" (Rom. 6:3-4). No person should balk at this, or think of this as a sectarian approach. No one in all of Scripture was ever asked to "pray the sinners prayer," or "ask Jesus into their hearts." The presence of such approaches today must not cloud our minds. Jesus did not say to do these things, and the Holy Spirit is not promised to those who do them. He is given to those that obey the Lord! (Used by permission. Given Blakely, a brother in the Christian Church in Joplin, MO offers daily meditations by e-mail. Visit his site: <<http://solid-www.com/wotruth>>)

What I Hear From You

I thank God for you and your God-given gift of understanding and writing concerning his inspired word, Including of course, your love, courage, and willingness to do

so. Your books have changed my relationship with our Lord and others I have shared them with. -Cleveland, TN

I think you are right on on the gray list. It gradually came upon me that, if I was at peace with my belief and understanding of what I should be doing, then other people were not a threat to me. That is when I really began to enjoy my Spiritual position. I am glad to answer what I believe and will share the same word with others, but I don't need to defend what I believe. I am at peace with God and any brother who wants to be in my fellowship. God bless. <by@pvtnetworks.net>

I have your book, *Free in Christ*, and have read it and re-read it and studied it and have shared it with others. I get your email also. Both are magnificent. I share your e-mail with others also. -Greenville, KY.

Let me express my thanks to you for making your materials available via the World Wide Web. I minister to a small dying congregation that is bound to traditionalism with

relationships in the place of doctrine-centered relationships. What a BLESSING!

Your paragraph from *Restoring the New Testament Church* is RIGHT ON! If I may quote you: "The vital point here is that our relationship is Christ-centered instead of doctrine-centered. We relate to God through the grace given in Christ rather than in understanding and keeping satisfactorily a system of doctrine. Such an effort, as many of us have learned, is futile. We search, study, argue, debate, divide, and isolate in our efforts to prove ourselves righteous through a doctrinal stance while we should recognize joyfully that our righteousness is a gift. How sad!"

I admit and confess to you, if any one was able to search, study, argue and debate a doctrinal position, I was one of the best. GUILTY!!! How sad! -George Simpson, Escondido CA <geologic@webcc.net>

no end in sight. Although there are a few who genuinely wish to embrace a living relationship with Jesus, most have settled for religious expression. I have been here or more than five years and have made little progress. Whenever new people are converted to the Lord, many of the legalistic ones succeed in turning them away in frustration. I inherited a congregation that was born out of strife. They had followed the all-too-common practice within most "restoration" churches and had "drawn their circle again" this time dividing over the marriage issue. They are so unhappy with themselves and with others. I feel badly for them but do not seem to have enough wisdom to know what to do. Please remember us in your prayers. <ldsiegle@home.com>

I praise God and thank Him for giving you the courage and the insight to put these books into print, and I thank Him that they found their way into my hands at last. I came to saving faith late in life – on my fortieth birthday. I received Christ with great joy and almost immediately began a struggle to stay "alive" in an atmosphere of pervasive legalism that has threatened to choke out the life of the Spirit time and again over the last 15 years. Maybe it was His plan for me to find the answers through study and prayer and much agony. Your books have given me or rather added courage to my conviction. I know others feel the same. Change comes oh so slowly, but it is coming even here. -Kerrville, TX

Words can't express how much your work has meant in my life and ministry. Thank you. I can't wait for the opportunity to meet you some day for a big Christian hug. <brucesbrew@juno.com>

First of all, THANK YOU! I have been looking at *Freedom's Ring* via the internet for a few months, checking it out a little bit at a time. I am now thoroughly reading over the books you shipped me and find I am examining my own belief system, re-evaluating and integrating "CHRIST"-centered