

FREEDOM'S RING

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

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Number 36

April 1999

Help For The Thessalonians

I wonder why we call the inhabitants of Thessalonica *Thessalonians* instead of *Thessalonians*!

Paul was just getting started with his successful evangelism in Thessalonica when opposition was aroused. He was asked to leave town abruptly. The scriptures do not tell us all about how he tried to help them after that, but I have come upon some of that previously unknown information. It is new to you, for I am just now telling about it! ☺ .

Before sharing this new information, let us review the circumstances of Paul's work among the Thessalonians. On his second tour he came "over into Macedonia" to Philippi with Silas, Luke, and probably Timothy. After being jailed there, Paul was asked to leave. So he went to Thessalonica (Acts 17) a large city of Romans, Greeks, and Jews. Teaching in the synagogue for three weeks, he converted *some Jews, a great many of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women*. In the few weeks of his work there he received some support from Philippi and did manual labor to supplement his income.

Unbelieving Jews stirred up a crowd against them so that Paul and Silas were sent away to Beroea. When the mob failed to find Paul, they attacked the house of Jason where he had been staying, dragged Jason before the officials who arrested him and others, then released them after bail was made. Paul went on from Beroea to Athens and to Corinth where he was joined by his companions. Timothy brought a report about the disciples in Thessalonica. That is when Paul wrote to them, however, he had already written several letters in their behalf.

He had written a letter to Jerusalem telling of the great success he had in converting those in Thessalonica, explaining how he had to leave them as helpless spiritual babes so soon after their conversion. Now, to help save that new church, he pled with the Judean brethren to send money to help them build a building. They would have no place to meet and no visibility without a building. Due to the culture of the city, it should be a structure that would impress the citizens and give an appearance of permanence. So please send help immediately.

To Antioch Paul wrote a very urgent letter telling how he had been forced to leave the infant congregation and how fragile their situation was with no preacher to take care of them. Besides, it was such a fertile field of a cosmopolitan nature with Romans, Greeks, and Jews willing to hear the message. So he urged the disciples in Antioch to send them a preacher. Yes, he understood that such an expenditure was not in their budget, but they should be willing to sell their jewelry and other property and give unselfishly to save these people. They could not excuse themselves before God if they failed to send them a preacher.

The church in Antioch was further exhorted to support the man liberally so that he could live in the style of success, a thing of importance in the culture of Thessalonica. Paul told them that he himself had been forced to make tents while there. He tried to keep that hidden from them for it would seem that his mission was of little importance if no one sponsored him in it. How could he present himself to them as an apostle – the apostle to the Gentiles – when he had to pay his own way? We must become all things to all men, he explained, for the sake of winning souls to Christ. So send a preacher immediately and support him well.

Paul also wrote to those admirable disciples in Philippi. He told them of a young man, Urbanus, among the converts in Thessalonica who had a strong desire to preach to the people in Persia. He aspired to attend the School of Preaching in Antioch to learn to preach, but he had no finances. Paul made an emotional appeal to those in Philippi to support Urbanus with his wife and three children for two years of training in Antioch. There his skills would be developed and he would be taught all the true doctrines that would insure his right direction as a preacher for the church of Christ. Then he could be a great influence among the Gentiles in Persia.

Then Paul wrote his letter to those whom he had left in Thessalonica in spiritual infancy. He urged them to study their Bibles every day to learn and follow the simple New Testament pattern in everything they did. They were to be sure that every one of them assembled every first day of every week to partake of the Lord's Supper and to lay by in store of their income. He emphasized that the fruit of the vine be unfermented, red grape juice and the cracker – uh, the bread -- be unleavened. They were cautioned that the public leadership in the assembly was to be by males only with all things done in a decorous manner that allowed no uplifting of hands, loud praises, clapping of hands in approval, or singing that involved less than the whole congregation. And this most serious pitfall must be avoided at all costs: there should be no instrumental accompaniment to the singing. All who might disregard any of these things mentioned should be admonished quickly and severely. If any persisted in this abandonment of practice of the true church of Christ, they should be publicly rejected from the fellowship. The true pattern must be followed even at the cost of division. Any deviation from these authorized things would bring eternal damnation to the whole congregation. Those were the things Jesus died to institute.

My indirect style in the above writing is not even subtle enough to veil my points. My bluntness might be offensive to you. If I have aroused your disfavor, however, it is likely because you see that I am focusing on traditional misconceptions under which you still labor. In all sincerity, we have developed a misdirected system of religion with emphasis on wrong things. If we really knew the truth about it all, we might

learn that the believers continued to meet in the synagogue as usual, the biggest difference being that they began to interpret all the Scriptures as being fulfilled in Christ. If they did not have access to the synagogue, their usual format was probably followed and adapted to Christian thought. Unfortunately, they had no Texas or Tennessee churches to use as models! ☺

Although the early disciples prayed, sang, taught, ministered to the needy, and communed together, there is no indication anywhere that these actions were all done in assemblies alone as parts of a system of worship. They became exercises shared in life situations whether in the home, social associations, or religious gatherings.

The Need of Professionals

In our time a congregation without a professional pulpiteer, teacher, and servant is thought to be on the endangered list. Never mind that many in the group might have been disciples for many years, they still must have a professional to teach and direct them. Chances are that by the end of three years, they will want a change of preachers, but still they must have another for any hope of success.

Paul mentioned no need of those new converts having a trained professional. By this we are not concluding that teaching is not needed but we are reevaluating the matter in view of Paul's priorities for those new converts. We do not know how many congregations he left there, but he did convert many people, and **Paul left them in charge of their own affairs!**

Even though there is no record in the Scriptures of a church owning a building, we put most of our money into structures (and ministers' salaries) while claiming to do "*all things according to the pattern*" and observing "*the law of silence.*" According to our traditions, buildings are deemed necessary and to be one of the first needs of a congregation.

Our methods have not been modeled after those of the apostle. Even though the souls of all persons are equal before God, Paul did not stop to preach to those at the dock or in the fields along the way. He went among responsible and reputable leaders with his message. Because of that, when he went from them, they did not have to be nurtured and overseen as a *mission church* by a *sponsoring (mother) church*.

Are we saying that schooling is not of value for a preacher? Hardly. But what is the nature of the schooling? Is it to drill the student in all of *our* doctrinal positions so he can convert others to our set of doctrines? Or is it to help him learn how to present the grace of God through Jesus in an understandable and convincing manner? Yes, teaching about Jesus is doctrine, but there is no example of an evangelist teaching most of our identifying doctrines to a person before conversion. And they never got around later to teaching those things that we have emphasized that separate us from all other believers.

If Urbanus learned enough from Paul's preaching to become a disciple, then he knew enough to proclaim it to others. And he could start in Thessalonica rather than having to go to Persia. Are we promoting a Person or a system of religion so complicated that only a trained and scholarly professional can educate us in it properly?

Are we contending that assembling as a body is unimportant? Hardly. But what is the purpose of those meetings? Are they to keep commandments that show we are faithful to the Lord, or are they support groups to build and sustain our faith? There is a vast difference. We will ask it another way. Are they efforts to be righteous by works in keeping rituals, or are they efforts to sustain the faith through which we are accounted righteous as a gift? The restrictive and

negative atmosphere often sponsored makes assemblies a burdensome effort to please God through right rituals. The free and joyous expression of worship and reaching out to one another make assemblies a source of encouragement.

Have you ever really looked at Paul's letter to that infant church to see what he emphasized? Such an investigation may bring surprises. Here we will call attention to only a few references indicating the thrust of his letter. Remember, Paul and his companions had left them due to persecution. Later, out of anxiety for them, Paul had sent Timothy back to check on their welfare. Timothy's report thrilled Paul. So he wrote his letter.

"And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with **joy** inspired by the Holy Spirit; so that you became **an example** to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the **word of the Lord sounded forth from you** in Macedonia and Achaia, but your **faith in God has gone forth** everywhere, **so that we need not say anything**" (1:7f). They could take care of their own affairs!

"But concerning love of the brethren, **you have no need to have any one write to you**, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another; and indeed **you do love all the brethren** throughout Macedonia. But we exhort you, brethren, **to do so more and more, to aspire to live quietly, to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we charged you; so that you may command the respect of outsiders, and be dependent on nobody**" (4:9-12). Earlier in the chapter he urged them to live **moral, holy lives**. In 3:3 he exhorted "that no one be moved by these **afflictions.**"

The discouragement of the apostle gave way to joy at the news concerning those new converts. He almost shouts with his pen, "For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy" (2:19).

Need I elaborate on the difference in Paul's methods and those commonly thought to be necessary today? Can you not agree that we have based our church identity on erroneous over-emphasis of certain points? Have we not developed a system of religion that overshadows the personal relationship with God?

Perhaps you like to watch the Portland Trailblazers play basketball or the Dallas Cowboys play football. But those athletes are not *playing!* They are *working!* Kids *play* these games in the back yard or at school. They play for the personal involvement and enjoyment. But the **sports industry** has become big business demanding rigid organization, much money, and professional workers, and thereby the essence of *play* is lost in the process. Our participation in sports becomes dependent upon, first, a rigid organization (business), then a stadium, professional players (workers), and paying spectators whose support is greatly determined by the win/loss record of the business.

Does that sound a bit like our participation in religion? If I let you make your own applications of the foregoing, you cannot be upset with me! So there you have it! []

HOOK'S POINTS

What a Circle of Friends, supporters, partners, and encouragers you are! You continue to help expand this outreach. You tell others of the books and give free copies to others. You do not let me worry about cost of this operation. You are gracious in every respect. Our operating fund has recovered. Some were gracious to send us personal gifts.

Maybe the raising of the prices of my books indicated that we are in need of personal finances. Not so. Our every need is being met, and our kids will not let us be deprived. Here is the reason I adjusted the prices. It is not likely that Lea and I will leave this world without some financial dependence on our family. I do not think it right to become more of a financial burden on them than necessary. To sell my books below market value might seem desirable for Lea and me, but actually it would eventually cost our children as they accept responsibility for our care. I think each of you will agree.

We are still able to send copies of *Free In Christ* without charge if you wish to distribute more than you are able to afford. Just ask for them.

Do you suppose that, if the advancement in learning had developed in the Southern Hemisphere earlier than in the Northern Hemisphere, our globes would have the South Pole, rather than the North Pole, tilted upward, and the top of our maps would be south instead of north?

The Telugu printing is due shortly. Dr. Prasad is eager for this tool for his active ministry in India. Dr. Prasad is a retired physician in his early sixties having now dedicated himself tirelessly in evangelism, even in the extreme heat of their summers. How different the economy and culture of such a great land and people as India. After a career as a doctor, he has not been able to afford so much as a motor bike for his many travels among the villages and cities of adjoining states. Fares for public transportation are a problem for he receives no support. Now he reveals that he has developed a heart condition which needs treatment beyond his ability to pay. I am at a loss as to what to write you! Except to pray for him.

This mailout is free for the asking. Send **e-mail** subscriptions, cancellations, and address changes to Vic Phares at <freedom@freedomring.org>. Send **regular mail** subscriptions, cancellations, and address changes to me by phone, snail mail, or e-mail at <hookc.teleport.com>. If you are on the list but don't care to be or don't read FR for any reason (which you need not explain), please let us know. If you do not send your new address, I assume that FR is not important to you.

Your letters mean much to us. I do not have time, however, to read all the material that comes, especially the forwarded materials sent, or to carry on correspondence about doctrinal subjects. My available writings already contain my views concerning most of the questions sent me. So please look them up for I do not have time and concentration to rewrite them.

Anno Domini: Recently I wondered how long it would be before the anti-Christian element in our country would protest our use of A.D. – the year of our Lord – in our dates. Later that very day I was looking up some data in *Time Almanac for 1999* and noticed that some substitutions of C.E. – Common Era and B.C.E – Before the Common Era were already in the book. That may be new only to me.

Leroy Garrett, my mentor and friend, a fellow-octogenarian, challenges me to a joint venture with him “to show that the 80s can be even better than the 70s”. He adds, “This Y2K thing is getting exciting. You and I will have the distinction of living in nine of the ten decades of one century and, if the Lord wills, in one decade of the next century. And to live in two millenniums is really something else.” Agreed!

The Spanish translation project has been delayed due to Robert Acosta changing jobs and having to move. But it is still in the works.

When the old mimeograph became available, every man and his dog was able to expand his audience (and maybe his ego) cheaply. Now the internet offers us a more sophisticated expansion whether we have anything worthwhile to write or not. As is always the case, the radical attracts other radicals, the weirdo gets the weirdos, the more balanced attract the balanced minds, and the intellectuals read the intellectual stuff (Mine! ☺). So each of us unconsciously reaches out to a certain mentality for respect. In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king!

3,000 on Pentecost: We have always expressed excitement that 3,000 persons were converted on Pentecost. A brother put that in a different perspective for me. He pondered, “After all the preparation God made for it through the generations culminating in Jesus, the Messiah, giving himself as an atonement for us, don't you think God must have been terribly disappointed that only 3,000 accepted him on Pentecost?”

Stanley Paher offers us another book, *The Church Shark*, “A Pernicious Dogmatism Revealed; The Evil of Authoritarianism & A Program for Recovery.” He explains, “The object of this book is to expose the destructive behavior of the church shark, principally for the benefit of the peaceful, positive-minded dolphins who detest divisiveness, oppression and church politics.” 75 pages. Order from Nevada Publications, 4235 Badger Circle, Reno, NV 89509, (775)-747-0800; FAX (775)-747-2916.

Whose ox is being gored? In 1995 “*morally outraged*” partisans hounded Oregon's old and not too handsome veteran Republican senator, Bob Packwood, out of office for his sexual indiscretions. I am offering no defense for him. When the ox was a glib, suave Democrat, however, that crowd became protective and tried to smear a supposed “religious right” and self-righteous Republicans for trying to bind their morals on others. Who is gullible enough to expect honesty and consistency?

Not All That Simple!

In our generation translators have labored to bring us simplified versions of the Scriptures. These have been helpful in making the language more understandable but their shortcoming is in the failure to simplify the theology. For instance, the words “there is one God” are simple to understand, but the nature of God is not all that simple.

Incredible as it seems now, I was nurtured by teachers who often commented on how easy the Bible is to understand, yet there was constant discussion, debate, and division about its teachings. Many times, when someone inquired of some deeper meaning, they would be told, “The secret things belong to the Lord our God; but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law” (Deut. 29:29). In such an answer some of the things revealed were being swept under the rug of secrecy. We were afraid to explore beyond simplistic answers. All that fear has not been relieved yet.

Under the heading above, I am intending to discuss a number of topics in a series in forthcoming issues of this mailout, if the Lord wills. My hope is to embolden the fearful to ask and face questions and to broaden some concepts while raising some unanswered questions intended to provoke further study and greater respect for differing opinions.

1. The Exodus

Those of us ancients who predated the “exodus” led by Charlton Heston in *The Ten Commandments* had to rely on our own imagination to picture the dramatic scenes. No doubt all of this generation have allowed that movie to shape their images.

Although I went to see the movie with skepticism about its authenticity, I will have to admit that I was deeply impressed with its presentation. I had only pictured an easily organized migration of a few hundred people, but the movie expanded my concept. In looking again at the exodus as recorded in the book of *Exodus* about forty-five years later, however, I have to admit, “It is not all that simple!”

The seventy offspring of Jacob were given the land of Goshen because they kept cattle and sheep. There they multiplied and became a great people in their 430 years in Egypt (Exo. 12:40). At the time of their exodus, they numbered 600,000 men able to go to war besides women and children (12:37). They left Egypt with a formidable army of 603,550 men twenty years old and upward equipped for battle (13:18; 38:26; Num. 1:46).

If the family of each man included five persons, that would make 3,000,000 persons in the march out of Egypt, along with a large “mixed multitude.” The number might have been much higher than that. Added to the persons were “very many cattle, both flocks and herds (12:38; 17:3). No, folks, it was not all that simple! This was one big operation!

In being really conservative, let us use the figure of 2,000,000. That escape was like moving out every person in the Portland metropolitan area or a city like Houston in one night. It takes more than thirty minutes to drive through Houston on IH-10 at speed limit. Or, think of moving out every person in such states as Arkansas, Hawaii, Idaho, Nevada, New Mexico, Kansas, or Mississippi. How far could a mass of people like that move in a day? They could hardly sneak out in the middle of the night undetected!

Each family would need to take such provisions as food, water, cookware, tents, and bedding. No doubt, they took other treasured possessions and their pets. This would require donkeys, camels, or oxen and carts. Whether the cattle and sheep were in combined droves or with their owners, they would require much space, food, and water.

After their initial supplies were depleted, they would need about two million pounds of food and a million gallons of water daily for the people, besides providing for the cattle. They would need wood for cooking. And that would be for forty years. You military people might want to work out the logistics of such an awesome operation.

Among two million people there are always many aged, crippled, gravely ill, and disabled people to consider. In a group that large there are new births and some deaths every day. And what of sanitary provisions and privacy? If Ahab’s Rentals had a portable toilet for each hundred people, he would have needed 10,000 of them on wheels for the migrants. And there would still be the problem of where to dump the waste.

If a conservative number of four to the family with their possessions and cattle were allotted a ten-by-ten foot travel space, there would be 500,000 spaces. If they traveled five families abreast making a 50 foot width, there would be 100,000 units making 20,000 files extending 200,000 feet, or about 38 miles, behind. Four to six days would be required for the last rank to reach where the first started from, thus it would take that long to cross the Red Sea. (My math is subject to correction.) It is unlikely that their IH-1 out of Egypt was wider than 50 feet. Or, did the emigrants go as a drove trampling the property of other citizens and through rough terrain?

Since their cell phones were not very dependable in those days, think of the problem of communication in organizing and expediting this whole venture.

Enough of that. Now, what is my point? This is it: *Everything that we read about in the Scriptures is just not all that simple!*

If you wish to probe further, we might ask some questions. Did God transport them miraculously? Are too few factual details given to reveal the whole story? Was the account embellished by a Hebrew historian in order to boost nationalism and/or to emphasize the greatness of God? Was this a traditional, inaccurate record preserved by God’s providence as a general historical account? *Is the Exodus account really all that simple?* []

2. God’s Attention To Individuals

God knows you individually, does he not? He sees you every moment, hears your every word, knows your every thought, understands your every feeling, and guides your every step. That is comforting to believe.

The world population is about 6-billion people. God shows no respect of persons, so he gives constant individual attention to each of the 6-billion of us. And he is conscious of the many billions who have already departed this life. This concept is simple to state but it is not all that simple when we try to explain how it can be.

It is no surprise that we cannot explain all the nature and capabilities of the divine Creator, yet some concepts can give us greater assurance. God surely will not judge us adversely for probing deeper in an effort to comprehend how he can give billions of us individual attention constantly.

What is your concept of God? Is he an awesome, oversized man 28 feet tall towering over us even as he sits on his throne? When we try to picture him in any physical form, we are simplifying him beyond recognition. God is Spirit who can manifest himself in various ways. The one God has manifested himself as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as he has served different capacities. His divine nature has been dispensed in different capacities in human beings.

Jesus prayed that “they may all be one; **even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us ... that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me...**” (John 17: 20-23). “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts,” Paul adds (Gal. 4:6). He had already revealed, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20).

This was not a physical, sensational experience, for Paul prayed that God “may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the **inner man**, and that Christ may dwell in your **hearts** through faith...” (Eph. 3:16f). This indwelling of God made them individually temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19) and collectively a temple of the Presence of God (Eph. 2:22). The Spirit of God indwells all his children (Rom. 8:9-11), however, all do not receive the same measure of his gift (Eph. 4:7). The three manifestations of God as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit indwell our hearts – our minds rather than our blood-pumping hearts. Their indwelling in our bodies is only in the sense that our bodies house our spirits.

In view of this indwelling in our very minds, instead of lifting up hands and sending prayers toward the Milky Way or looking beyond the Big Dipper or the Southern Cross in prayer

and praise thinking he is located out there, we can think of his presence within our own spiritual beings. We don't have to sing "I want to be where you are." Does not our relationship with him make him within us instead of at some remote distance, though he does permeate the universe? (You think of his dwelling place as being over the warmer zone rather than the North Pole, don't you?) His dispensation of himself in each of us makes him a personal deity. We need not shout our prayers or even whisper them. He knows our thoughts. We can talk to him who is within us by communicative thoughts. He is a very personal deity.

Would you greet God if you met him on the street or in the aisle of the church? Even the Safeway employees are required to look customers in the eye and greet them. That is for business purposes. Do you pass persons in whom the Spirit of God lives without acknowledging them? They are the most accurate representation of God you will see in this life. In slighting them, you slight God! Interaction with another is the interaction of two spirit-filled hearts. Can we not say that such is one way God gives us individual attention?

No, understanding the personal attention of God is not all that easy; neither are the suggestions that I am offering all that simple. However, believing this may bring a sobering realization of his personal interaction in our lives. It is easier to state it on paper than to commit our trust to it.

Fruit of the Spirit

May a non-believer, Buddhist, or Muslim exhibit love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness (reliability), gentleness, and self-control – *fruit of the Spirit* (Gal. 5:22)? We grant that they can. Then, do they do it without the Spirit, or do they have the Spirit?

There is a measure of God in each human. Man is made in the image of God, which is a spiritual image since God is not physical, and God has breathed into him the breath of life. All life is from God. From parent to child that original life has continued to be passed on through the generations. That is not just a physical energizing, for the passages above indicate that the Spirit dwells in our hearts. Thus he gives spiritual direction – the *law written on the heart, God's own principle of action which is love* – to all people of all times. In different times and cultures men may not worship according to Biblical revelation, but when they worship a Creator, they are worshipping the same God we serve. They may not know a lot about him, but we don't know the mysteries of God either.

Paul addressed those who were worshipping God as the *unknown deity*. He assured the Athenian worshippers that they were on the right course as those who "seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us, for **'In him we live and move and have our being'**; as even some of your poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring.' **Being then God's offspring...**" (Acts 17:27f). They recognized the fatherhood of the one they served in veiled understanding. A measure of God's gift was in their hearts. God could work good through them. For those who have not his revelation, God will judge them according to the law written in their hearts.

If humans are cloned, and since it is possible, it probably will be done very soon, the life in that creature will be but a continuation of that part of the Spirit of God common to all mankind.

I am still doubtful that there is intelligent life on other planets, but if there is life in other beings, what is its source? We are limited in our choice of answers. Either it came from

matter or it came from the Source of Life. You have already answered that by your belief or atheism.

Eventually, God will reclaim that measure of himself that he dispensed in each person, whether saint or sinner. At death, "the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it" (Ecc. 12:7).

In concluding this essay I will throw you another question to ponder. In order for Jesus to "come again", will he have to leave us and no longer indwell us so he can "return"? Will he go away again so he can return again?

These are suggested thoughts that I leave for your pondering. I fully value the question Zophar put to Job: "Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the almighty?" (Job 11:7).

It is not all that simple, is it? []

WHAT I HEAR FROM YOU

Thank you so much for your newsletter. It is always a help. I have never attended the COC but was involved for years in the Pentecostal Church. They are so much alike. The legalism and control are so very similar. I am so thankful for the freedom I have found in Christ. -Albany, OH.

I thoroughly enjoyed your book *Free In Christ* which was given to me by a fellow former-legalist. Several of my thoughts and concerns are crystallized in the pages of that outstanding work. I am eager to read more of the liberating literature that you are willing to provide. -Danville, KY.

WOW! Well spoken! (Roses With Other Names). Your thoughts have hit a resonating chord in my mind. In the past few years I have also come to similar conclusions. It goes against what I have been taught most of my life, but I do think it is time to stop treating other believers as if they do not have real faith in the same God and Christ. It is time to stop treating them as if they were heathen. AND it is HIGH TIME to stop the DIVISIVENESS that is going on in our brotherhood today. Too many people, and too many written articles are merely gossiping about specific people, and not being specific about wrongs or scriptural definitions. .. God bless you. I hope/pray you are not "tarred & feathered" too badly by some of our fretful (& often tyrannical) brethren. They are too scared of getting left out of heaven if they 'overlook' or 'goof' on some important matter of doctrine. God help us ALL! We are all desperately in need of His grace! -signed.

I have read all your books (more than once) and often review them and meditate on your teachings. I even used *Free In Christ* as the basis for a Sunday School class I teach. It was a blessing. I attend an Assembly of God church which is pretty good. Compared with the situations that you describe this congregation is relatively free BUT I am convinced that the absolute truth is not contained in the 16 Fundamental Truths of the AOG, and I love to challenge the status quo, grow and learn more. I think that is one of the reasons why I love your writings. While I have not been exposed to much of what you talk about (I did not even know much about the COC before reading your books and web site), there is a lot that still applies to my understanding (or misunderstanding) of scriptures. -Garland, TX.

I was wondering if there is any information on your site written specifically about the Crossroads / Boston / International Churches of Christ movement. I've been a member for a number of years, but you are forcing me to rethink a lot of my

views (as well as teaching me a lot) about restoration, authority, grace, freedom, unity, the *right* church, etc. I'm really grateful for what I'm learning and I praise God for you and the work you're doing. -New York, NY. [For info on the ICC, click on Links from my web page and then click on *McKean's Mafia*.]

Thank you for another powerful, well reasoned and presented *Freedom's Ring!!* I say a hearty "Amen" to all the accolades you receive! I, too, continue to thank the dear Lord for leading me to meet you, and to hear/read your words of wisdom. I am thankful for your humor, gentleness and deep humility. But for the grace of God I would continue to parrot the words of my teachers, as I had been doing for many years! I would have continued to teach legal works for salvation - the works taught to me by well-meaning Christians, I'm sure. We believed that we had all the answers to every question, and we knew with divine assurance that we were right and could not be wrong! How wrong I actually found myself! I thank the dear Lord that he has brought and continues to bring me to fuller maturity. God has allowed you to be responsible for the major part of such maturity as I have reached, and am reaching. - Frankie Shanks, Poplar Bluff, MO. [For ten years now, Frankie has been a constant source of encouragement and strength for me. She has done enough reformatory writing and distributing of my books to get herself on the endangered species list and has borne the consequences inflicted by zealous defenders of the status quo who are too "righteous" to even eat a hamburger with her.]

Thank you for your fantastic article *Roses With Other Names*. We should all remember Paul's wisdom of Romans 14 when we're tempted to be judgmental. Myself included. I've recently been a little down and your newsletter really brightened my day. -Larry.

Your books continue to bless so many. I gave away my last "extra" *Free In Christ* to a very special lady who has always been a true seeker but was stifled by the legalistic chains of the congregation she attended. After much soul searching, she has left that congregation and is attending ours against her husband's wishes. She is a wonderful Christian wife and mother and always submissive to her husband, but she felt her spirit dying and knew she had to make a change. She has been refreshed by the freedom she has experienced, but it has been difficult for her. Your book has been a blessing to her. Just a week or so later, another member called me requesting a copy of *Free In Christ* as she had seen it in the preachers office. - FL.

I read your book *Free In Christ* about five years ago. It really helped us get through a rough time. -Dwayne Tackett, Billings, MT.

There really are people (like me) who believe that God opens doors of opportunity and it's O.K. to give Him credit. When I read some of the material you are offering, I feel the hand of God blessing my life. Thanks. The creation and maintenance of a site like this is a lot of work, so to whoever is involved in that process, Thank You. -Steve Mann, Shafter, CA. [Vic Phares, of Shreveport, LA, is the skilled and dedicated partner who operates the far-reaching internet site.]

I have ordered several copies of *Free In Christ*. We just last week began a new congregation here in Hot Springs, AR with 50-60 precious souls. We left a congregation of 400-500 to start a new ministry of tearing down walls and building bridges to our community and to other Christians. Pray for us. We are all excited about this new work. Mike Norfleet <NORFLEET@PRODIGY.NET>

I have enjoyed your two-part article on conversion. I think you hit the nail on the head. I've recently read a compila-

tion of writings of Christians from the first two centuries. It's interesting to note the great emphasis they placed on baptism, and yet how it remained a "gospel of grace." Enemies remarked how "vain" it was to believe a person could be "forgiven without doing anything good, but just being dunked in water, calling on the power of the name of a supposed god." I think over the centuries, many of which saw evil schemes of works-salvation being promoted, the Church as a whole began to see baptism as a "meritorious work," and became "unable" to fit such a work into a message of unmerited grace. However, in the very beginning, the world saw it as too little to be called meritorious! -AR []

Does Suicide Seal One's Doom?

A sister in Ohio sent this question: "What passages would you use to either prove or disprove that Christians who commit suicide are able to still be saved?"

The subject of suicide, like that of abortion and other important issues, is not addressed in the scriptures, so a person's willful self-destruction must be judged by principles given to guide our conduct.

It is thought traditionally that a person seals his or her eternal doom by suicide. Few comforting words have been offered to relieve the shock of family and friends. With resigned quietness we have left them in unrelieved grief. We would like to offer hope, but that desire must not allow us to create false hope. Is there any real hope?

When the subject is approached, it is said generally that the person who kills self dies in violation of "Thou shalt not kill," and has no chance to repent and ask for forgiveness, hence, is beyond redemption. But suicide is not necessarily a violation of "Thou shalt not kill.". That commandment had to do with murder, not manslaughter. It is not the taking of life that is sin, but it is the motivation for killing. Murder comes from ill-will, hatred, jealousy, and such evil thoughts. John explains, "Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer..." (1 John 3:15).

There are several instances of justified killing (manslaughter) in the Scriptures listed in the very law that contained the Ten Commandments (consider Exo. 21:12; 22:2; Lev. 24:16; 20:13; Exo. 21:15, 17; Num. 35; Deut.20 - instructions for battle where killing was commanded.) Manslaughter could be honorable and expedient when serving the cause of justice rather than being expressions of personal hatred, rage, jealousy, or vengeance. The higher motive outweighs the general restriction.

Jesus and other martyrs chose to die for good cause. Although they did not perform the acts of self-destruction, they willingly put themselves in the situation where it would happen. Samson willingly brought his own death for the cause of his people and he is listed as a hero of faith (Heb. 11:32f). Some hopelessly ill persons take their own lives to spare their loved ones the extended emotional and financial burden of caring for them. Whether they are justifiable or not, we must recognize such cases as acts of unselfishness.

While I cannot in good conscience offer these thoughts as a support for willful suicide, I mention them in order to offer the grieving family some comfort and hope for their loved one. In Oregon the voters now have legalized assisted suicide. I cannot approve of that, either for the assistant or the one being killed. Though it may be done as an act of mercy, it presumes too heavily on knowing the unrevealed will of God and claiming grace which he has not offered either by word or precedent.

Most of the suicides of which I have known more details have been the result of a psychotic suicidal compulsion caused by mental illness. I know, some would class emotional

disorders as demon possession, but I think that is an ignorant, insensitive insult to the one who has a mental disorder. Sin is not a disease, nor is disease sin.

In his grace and mercy, God does not demand the impossible of us. He does not demand sanity of the mentally ill. Even under the rigid code of Law through Moses, Jesus emphasized that the showing of mercy was of greater importance than keeping laws that would prevent it. His numerous "Sabbath violations" made that clear (See Matt. 12:1f; 12:9f; Lk. 14:1f; 13:10f; etc.). Law offers no mercy or grace. "Mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13). God alone is able to judge, and he will judge mercifully those who seek his mercy.

Back to the question. No, those Christians who commit suicide are not "able to still be saved." No one is able. (The questioner probably understands that.) "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God..." (Eph. 2:8). None of us are *able* to be saved but we must depend on God's gift. To any of us who might think we can keep a supposed code of law well enough to be saved, James would shout, "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it" (James 2:10)! That includes all of us.

The man who kills himself has no chance for repentance and asking forgiveness. Neither does the person who dies in a moment of anger, pride, or jealousy. Would his state be better than that of the suicide? If you die of compulsive speeding, overeating, or smoking, what is your hope? If you fail in "one point" while someone else fails in another, who has better standing before God?

(If you will forgive my sick sarcasm, I will offer the legalist an acceptable mode of suicide. Don't blow your brains out. That is too fast. Instead, swallow a big dose of cyanide or sleeping pills and then ask God's forgiveness before it take effect! ☹)

If we must be in a state of achieved righteousness the moment we die in order to enter into eternal life, no one will make it! None are "able" to achieve it – able to be saved. So accept the gift! Because of his atonement, we struggling sinners can be in fellowship with him who accepts our sins and accounts us as righteousness. His forgiveness is continuous as we stumble along in our relationship with him.

"If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth; but 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. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." (1John 1:6-8).

Yes, there is hope for you and me both as we die in our own imperfection while being accounted perfect through his gift of righteousness. However, there is no assurance for one who dies in deliberate sin presuming upon the grace of God and using it as a license. []

"Hallowed Be Your Name."

While in the doctor's waiting room, I could hear several children playing noisily, but I could not see them. Above all the others, the child who had the deepest and loudest voice could be heard punctuating most every utterance with "Oh, my God!" After a while the children came in view. I was appalled to learn that those words were being yelled out by a little girl with curly blond hair who was still in training pants.

As shocking as the child's use of God's name was, I knew she must have only been innocently using the language

heard in her home. The disrespect of her parents for the holiness of God must be deplorable even though it is possible that they are church-going persons. Even people who profess faith in God use his name vainly as a meaningless punctuation of their speech and an injected by-word.

Would I be too presumptuous in suggesting that the girl was imitating the language of the mother more than the father? Judging from the very common usage of the expression "oh, my God" on television nowadays, it seems to be a favorite expression of women. That is especially disappointing since, traditionally, women have been more spiritually sensitive than men. It seems to be a part of the new image of the female to use the coarse and macho language that has been associated with blustering males in the past.

If you use that expression which I even shrink from repeating in print (Call me self-righteous!), you may be protesting in thought that you do not mean anything by its use. It is just a meaningless punctuation of your speech. There! You identified the sin which is the using God's name in vain.

The third or the Ten Commandments is "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain" (Exo. 20:7). *Vain* means *meaningless, empty, worthless*. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name..." (Matt. 6:9). *Hallowed* means *holy*. That which is holy is set apart or sanctified in opposition to being common or vulgar. God's *holy* name cannot be used as a *common* word by those who reverence him.

Profanity is not just cursing. To profane is to treat something sacred with abuse, irreverence, or contempt. That includes deity. "Holy and awesome is his name!" (Psa. 111:9). We hear God referred to as "the Man upstairs," "Somebody up there," and "the Big Guy" even by believers. Would you dare to address your prayer to either of those designations?

We will observe here that it is not just some word or spelling in our language that is holy. It is Deity who is holy. It is the impudence of the creature in referring to his Creator with such contempt that is reprehensible. In speaking of our inconsistent use of the tongue, James shames, "With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessings and cursing. My brethren, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening fresh water and brackish? Can a fig tree, my brethren, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh" (James 3:9f). The person who has a healthy awe for God does not have a mouth like the kitchen faucet giving forth two kinds of speech.

When a person expresses surprise, shock, or any other emotion with the pretentious outcry of "Oh, my God," it is also a profaning of prayer and our approach to God. In a somewhat similar manner, when a person asks God to damn someone, it is a request, a prayer to God, showing the greatest contempt for a fellow human being. To say you do not really mean a curse as a prayer does not excuse it or absolve your irreverence and contempt.

The ancient Jews considered the personal name attributed to the Creator too holy to be uttered. In the Hebrew language it was YHVH or JHVH. The Hebrew had no vowels, but English translators later added vowels making it Jehovah. Instead of pronouncing the sacred name, the Jews called it the "Four Letters", which in Greek was the "Tetragrammaton." Such respect came not from a command but from their awe and reverence. Although such a formal restriction is not placed upon us, a healthy sense of awe is essential to our relationship with God.

Why Use Shocking Speech?

Why is profanity of speech so commonly used? In verbal outbursts, exclamations, and bold assertions, why do people call upon words and expressions which relate to religion and the holiest of Beings and things? Without any psychological expertise, we can detect some reasons, none of which justify the profanity.

Insecure teenagers want to prove their macho qualities, their daring nature, and their rebellion by shocking speech and actions. Most of them find it easier to gain this attention by swaggering speech than by their actions. So they try to out-do each other in profane and vulgar speech -- unless they are intelligent enough to be confident of their own self-image or have religious training that instills reverence.

Many persons never mature enough to cease such aggressive adolescent self-image building. It becomes such a psychological crutch that they feel an inability to express themselves in meaningful language, so they punctuate it with shocking profanity and vulgarity. They continue to feel socially insecure with their peers who use blustering speech so that,

without that bold speech, they are afraid of being disdained as a nerd. And after long practice, some lose all sense of the distasteful nature of their contemptuous and irreverent language. What is classified as vulgarity may differ in different generations and cultures. Are those shocking terms relating to the human body and its functions inappropriate? To ask that question is almost to answer it. First, "Let your speech always be gracious..." (Col. 4:6). If we must shock, we should do it like Jesus did -- with challenging ideas and exposure of hypocrisy instead of vulgarity which adds nothing positive. Second, vulgar language degrades the image of mankind and is contemptuous of the qualities making him higher than a beast.

Surely, I am not going to be picky about the common usage of *hell*, you may be thinking. Yes, I am! Why use the word so recklessly and with such abandon? Its use is intended to indicate that the speaker is not afraid of hell. He can toss the thought of hell as a by-word, showing a disdain for its awesome meaning. And I suspect that few have any real concern about hell any more, for hell is mentioned more in jokes than in awe.

In similar manner, the use of *damn*, even as an adjective describing an inanimate object, is an expression of disdain of the most horrible truth that the mind can conceive -- the reality of meeting eternal retribution for our sins. To use the word in disdain to apply to a human being is to show utter contempt for the person. That is the opposite of the attitude of a true disciple who is identified by his love.

We are to judge our speech, not altogether by the specific words we use, but by the attitude they express. In my youth when my associates were much more respectful in their choice of language, many euphemisms for "curse words" were common. Only a nerd would use such inane expressions today!

Are euphemisms (sound-like words) inappropriate? Why do you ask? Why do you wish to use those terms? If they express the attitude of contempt or cursing usually expressed in strong-er, more shocking language, then who could defend their use? Do you wish to sound like you are cursing when you are not?

Though the name of God may not be involved, the curse which questions the parentage of a person is designed to express contempt which is not a fruit of the Spirit. Jesus condemned the addressing of a person with "*Raca*," an Aramaic term of contempt, or with "You fool!", not because those are forbidden words but because they were used to express a bad attitude.

If his name (being) is not hallowed in your conversation, how can you then pray, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name"?

All right, I am just preaching to the choir; the people who need this lesson don't read this mailout, you may be saying. I would like to think so, but discordant notes are heard sometimes even from the best of choirs! []