

FREEDOM'S RING

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

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Did Peter Deserve Paul's Rebuke?

When we are a long way from home, we may take innocent liberties that we would not take under watchful eyes of the critical people back home. Evidently, that is what Peter was doing in Antioch. He was enjoying association with some native disciples and eating some of their exotic foods, perhaps, like ham and eggs or shrimp cocktail.

That association and food turned sour very quickly, however, when he saw some of the Judean brethren who had come from James in Jerusalem. Fearing their censure, he put on his Jewish face again and withdrew from the Gentiles, thus leading other Jewish disciples including Barnabas to separate themselves also (Gal. 2).

Now, that punched Paul's *red button!* He just about "blew his cool"! In front of the disciples of Antioch and the dignitaries from Judea, he gave Peter an embarrassing scolding with no apologies thrown in. Paul declared that Peter was hypocritical and "stood condemned." Our curiosity as to how Peter reacted is not satisfied in the account.

Busy years passed with Peter going to the Jews and Paul to the Gentiles with apostolic approval and God's blessing (Gal. 2:6-10). Long after Paul had written his letter to the Galatians, and after his third missionary tour, he returned to Jerusalem bearing the gift of money from the Gentiles to the Jews. Enroute, "At Cenchreae he cut his hair, for he had a vow" (Acts 18:18). Arriving in Jerusalem, he was gladly received by James and the elders who advised him, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed; they are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or observe the customs. What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you but that you yourself live in observance of the law" (Acts 21:17-26). Paul followed their suggestion the very next day.

Now, was Paul playing the same role he condemned Peter for in earlier years? Could Peter, though evidently not present there, not have declared, "Yeah, see how the pot called

the kettle black? He is practicing the same "wishy-washy" insincere behavior that he accused me of."

Since there is no scriptural record of defense of Peter's conduct and no censure of Paul's actions, it would be ill-advised for me to defend Peter or condemn Paul. So it is more appropriate that I look for the points of distinction in their actions. We might have rightly expected a stronger stand by James, however, but we can appreciate the tedious position in which he served.

In both incidents the point of contention was concerning how Jewish and Gentile disciples related to one another as they related to Christ in one body. In the Jerusalem conference (Acts 15) it had been agreed that Gentiles were not required to become as Jews by circumcision and keeping the Law of Moses, while there was no intention that the Jewish disciples would repudiate those things for themselves. Apostolic understanding was that Peter was sent to the Jews and Paul's mission was to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:6-10).

Through a vision it had been made clear to Peter at the conversion of Cornelius (Acts 10-11) that no distinction was to be made between Jew and Gentile. Out of his Judean setting, Peter was demonstrating that understanding by his association with the disciples in Antioch. But upon the arrival of those from back home, he practiced discrimination, thus making God's people into two parties with different requirements. His action intimated that the Gentiles were less acceptable unless they became as Jews.

While Jesus had told the Samaritan woman that "salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22), at no time did he or any writer indicate that salvation was through their Law which made them a distinct people.

In contrast to Peter's conduct, Paul's actions in response to James' proposal were conciliatory. He had collected money from Gentiles and had brought it as a bonding gesture. He was erasing party attitudes and distinctions.

It was not always a comfortable route for Paul. He once explained his varying conduct, "For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law – though not being myself under the law – that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law – not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ – that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all

men, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings" (1 Cor. 9:19-23).

Did Paul vacillate from what he had written about the Law? The tenor of his epistle to the Galatians had been "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse" and "You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by law; you have fallen away from grace." (3:10; 5:4). The key words in those passages are **rely** and **justified**. Anyone who would add to or change the gospel was to be accursed (Gal. 1:6-9). It was not to be **the gospel plus the Law**. To **rely** on circumcision or Jewish identification in order to be **justified** was to fall under the curse. However, thousands of Jews in Judea kept the "customs" (sacred ordinances) as a continued devotion to God while trusting in Christ for their justification. No word of censure for such action is in the Scriptures.

Perhaps you were taught as I was. From my earliest remembrance, sincere teachers led me to think that the Law of Moses was nailed to the cross, and hence, was abolished, destroyed, and blotted out at that time. There was a sort of fifty-day limbo until Pentecost. The "new law" of Christ, supposedly, was preached on Pentecost, and keepers of Moses' law were at peril from that day forward. However, that is not taught in the Scriptures!

Law **Not** Abolished.

Jesus cautioned, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 5:17-19). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was neither **changing nor destroying the law nor giving "his own law"**! He was explaining the true meaning of the law which was to extend into the kingdom of heaven. However, this extension was to be only until its fulfillment of purpose as a custodian to bring its subjects into the spiritual kingdom of Christ (See Gal. 3:23-29).

As Jesus was nailed to the cross bearing our sins, our **sins** were nailed there with him and blotted out. Our list of infractions which held us in bondage was destroyed. Yet the custodian (the Law; Gal. 3:23-29) was not dismissed immediately. He was around for most of two more generations of transition. He had not fulfilled and accomplished his mission completely. The writer of *Hebrews* quotes Jeremiah's prophecy (Jer. 31:31-34) that God would establish a new covenant with Israel and Judah. Then he concludes, "In speaking of a new covenant he treats the first as obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away" (Heb. 8:8-13). Two generations after the cross, the covenant of law was still around but ready to vanish away.

At the inauguration of the spiritual kingdom on Pentecost, Peter quoted Joel's prophecy about the "last days" and, using Joel's apocalyptic language, indicated a dramatic shake-up of their current system in their time. Concluding his message, Peter "...testified with many other words and exhorted them, saying, 'Save yourselves from this crooked generation'" (Acts 2:40). Terrible vengeance was to come on their rejecting generation, but believers could escape before the fall of their of their Capital city and the great tribulation associated with it.

The Hebrew epistle is a message written toward the end of this "last days" period. It encouraged disciples and was designed to show God's fulfillment of the law in the spiritual kingdom. It may be profitable for you to read the entire epistle again with this in mind. Then in Chapter 12:18-29, the finalizing

change from the earthly nation and kingdom to the spiritual nation and kingdom is anticipated. Shortly after this, in AD 70, Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed and the Jews were scattered, never to see their former nation restored. Rather than destroying the Law of Moses, God fulfilled it, accomplished its purpose, and made it impossible for it to be practiced in a religious-political system as in former times. Thus ended the "last days" of God's dealing with the Jews as a nation. Now a racial Jew is accepted through faith in Christ just as anyone else is.

During this "last days" period, Paul could continue to observe rituals of the Law, but he certainly did not offer sacrifices of atonement for sins, for that would have been a denial of the sufficiency of Jesus' atonement. However, the segregating vacillation of Peter could not be excused. The unity of the body is the vital issue involved in judging the conduct of Peter and Paul in this setting.

For sake of brevity, extensive references and contexts have not been explored here, but you may expand on this study as you see fit. Considering some present-day applications to our conclusion, we gain more value from this investigation.

Present Applications

Are we as disciples in jeopardy if we observe any Mosaic laws? Paul declared, "Now I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is bound to keep the whole law" (Gal. 5:2-3). Most every male disciple reading this probably has been circumcised! Many sincere disciples will not eat the foods designated as *unclean* under the Law. Some observe the Sabbath. Others fast. All disciples strive to keep the Ten Commandments (except for the Sabbath) though this legal code is not the basis of our covenant as it was for the Law.

Do such practices endanger our relationship with Christ? If we do them as a means of **justification**, the answer is **yes!** In his next sentence Paul declares unequivocally, "You are severed from Christ, you who would be **justified** by law." However, there are many things we are at liberty to do as a matter of conscience or in an effort to honor, praise, worship, and serve God. We are not **justified** by *worship, service, and correct conduct*, but we **honor** God through them.

In spite of what I was taught to believe, there is no definitive list of actions and practices through which I must honor God, making any sincere deviation damning. Above my desk is a wooden cross artistically carved by Alvis Rogers. That honors Christ. Honor can be given continuously through paintings, music, buildings for assembly, writings, and even a web site.. Worship may be expressed by bowing, kneeling, lifting up hands and weeping in veneration, laughing for joy, and shouting praises. Those uplifted hands are "holy hands" (dedicated), for all that they do is to honor God – a continuous worship. Who can say that you cannot communicate your feelings toward God by lighted candles or that your prayers may not be enhanced by incense if that, like fasting, lifting up hands, or holding hands in prayer, is meaningful to you? It is undeniable that God has favored lamps and incense.

Such suggestions may sound horrific to you. I fully understand. For most of my life I held tenaciously to the "five acts of worship" concept in which I had been indoctrinated. When I finally had courage and sense to investigate for myself, I learned that there is no example of God ever refusing sincere worship of anyone whether the method was *authorized* or not. Such "test cases" as the worship of Cain and Abel, Nadab and Abihu, and "in vain do they worship me" are still used by many who fail to recognize the insincerity of those worshippers, ignore

their context, and twist their meaning to prove a pre-conceived conclusion.

To “worship by command” is an effort to please God by legal works. To worship by sincere expression is spiritual. Our living sacrifice of the whole self is not limited to a few rituals. Most of the divisions in our Movement are over efforts to define legal requirements in rituals of worship. A legal code binds and limits but the expression of love, which is the “law of Christ,” is liberating. The interaction between Paul and Peter offers liberating lessons to the willing heart. It affirms the concept and practice of unity in spite of diversity.

(For an enumeration of many “unauthorized” acts of worship which have been acceptable to God, read *Freedom’s Ring, No. 17*; Chapter 14 of *Free To Speak*, and Chapter 4 of *Free As Sons.*) []

Earthly Expectations

God dealt with his chosen nation, Israel, for so long that their spiritual perceptions were always clouded by nationalism. At the time of Jesus’ ministry the Jews were in subjection to the Romans. They hoped for the *Messiah* to restore their kingdom. Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 4:17) and he gave many teachings and parables indicating the spiritual nature of his kingdom. But earthly expectations had become a sort of mental block even though Jesus revealed himself as the Messiah by the undeniable proof of his resurrection

After his extensive teaching and proof of his Messiahship, it must have been with deep disappointment that he listened to the question of his chosen students shortly before his ascension. They did not ask, “Is your spiritual reign about to begin?” Rather, they inquired, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.’” (Acts 1:6-8). They still had earthly expectations. They hardly seemed qualified to be spiritual leaders in a spiritual kingdom.

Israel still relied on the promises made to David. “When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ... And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever” (2 Sam. 7:12-16). The Jews failed to grasp that this projected infinitely further in meaning than just to David’s earthly kingdom. That physical, earthly throne certainly had not been made sure through the intervening centuries.

A few days after the apostles’ questioning, Peter, speaking by the Spirit on Pentecost, made the proper connection. In a climactic conclusion of his discourse, he declared, “Brethren, I may say to you confidently of the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants upon his throne, he foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. This Jesus God raised up, and of that we are all witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this which you see and hear. ... Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you

crucified” (Acts 2:29-36). Jesus was that descendant of David, and he had ascended a few days earlier to his throne to begin his reign over the spiritual kingdom..

Those submitting to baptism on Pentecost became the subjects of the King, changing their citizenship from the earthly to the heavenly. Of some who held to Judaism later, Paul sadly asserted, “their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil. 3:19-20; NIV). Gentile disciples were also told, “..you are ... fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household>” (Eph. 2:19).

In view of this it seems incredible that countless believers expect Jesus to return to earth, set up an earthly kingdom, and reign as an earthly king in spite of his very words, “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). Is the earthly to replace the spiritual?

The disciples had heard all his parables about the kingdom but they had failed to grasp their meaning. Unfortunately, too many of us have followed their thinking. We have given lengthy, involved discourses on the parables of the tares and dragnet (Matt.13:36-47), the importunate widow (Luke 18:1-8), the pounds (Luke 19:11-27), the barren fig tree (Matt. 21; Mark 11), the wicked husbandman (Matt. 21), the marriage of the king’s son (Matt. 22), and the judgment parables (Matt. 25) applying them to ourselves. Those parables, and others, dealt with God’s imminent reckoning with Israel due to their rejection of him. Their nation would suffer the terminating consequences within the lifetime of some of them. The earthly kingdom was to be superseded by the spiritual kingdom. The very purpose God had in separating the nation of Israel was to bring Christ and his universal spiritual reign into this world. We miss the truth and devalue that goal when we turn it into an earthly expectation.

God’s selection of Jacob and the nation he made through him was undeserved. God was faithful to his purpose in spite of their apostasies. The special favor was to a nation collectively, not meaning that each citizen was counted righteous. Many of David’s psalms were praise for victory over national enemies, like ‘You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies’ in the beloved 23rd Psalm. There were even prayers for God to cruelly destroy those who opposed Israel. That earthly system which prevailed before Christ was not typical of the spiritual kingdom which includes the people of God today. To expect a restoration of such a system is to look backward from Christ in seeking restoration of a system which he dissolved. It would demand reinstatement of a civil/religious state government based upon law, with righteousness being dependent upon keeping a code of law.

Because God was dealing with Israel as a religious-political nation, his covenant with them was based on law. It was a nation with a “State church” arrangement. A person civil and religious requirements by fulfilling law. When a person tithed, for example, he was not “giving” any more than you “give” to the IRS. He was obeying a law. He was paying an “income tax” off the top of his increase to support his government which was administered by the religious – the Levites. There were no other taxes until they changed the system from a Theocracy to a monarchy by choosing a king. The Levites administered both the civil and religious functions of their nation.

Those who would suggest a tithe as a standard for Christian “giving” today choose a poor basis for it. Every employed disciple in our land “gives” several times more than a tithe of his income in taxes and contributions when we include combined civil and religious obligations as the Jews did.

That is just another example of our mixing earthly concepts with the spiritual. We tend to make our pie of mixed

fruit. Fruit cocktail pie has not caught on except in religion! Another strange twist relates to dietary rules given Israel. Some sincere disciples refrain from eating foods forbidden by the Law of Moses. They suppose those foods were forbidden because they were not healthful foods. A physical reason. If God had been giving rules of health, why would he not have told them of bacteria, sterilization, pasteurization, and other simple rules of sanitation?

When one violated a dietary rule, the result was not sickness but ceremonial uncleanness. Evidently, many of the rules of the law were intended to steer Israel away from spiritual contamination. The pagans and idol worshippers had cultic regulations and meanings to certain foods. Israel was to avoid such idolatrous connections.

In commenting on the resurrection, Paul informed, "But it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical, and then the spiritual" (1 Cor. 15:46). That principle applies to kingdom matters also. Paul chided believers who were trying to hold to Christ and Jewish nationalism based on law, "Are you so foolish? Having begun with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?" (Gal. 3:3). That question still reverberates throughout the kingdom today.

"For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (2 Cor. 5:1). Heavenly, spiritual expectations! []

HOOK'S POINTS

I have followed Paul half of the way. He was "forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to that which is before" (Phil. 3:13). I am rather good at the *forgetting*, but I don't have much *stretch* left!

Most of you I have never seen, but I feel a special kindred with you as these papers are sent out. All are welcome. Send subs for the printed copy to me. To receive it by e-mail, do not contact me or Vic. Use a new, automatic method: just send an e-mail to <freedomring-subscribe@egroups.com>. You will receive a confirmation. To be removed, send an e-mail to <freedomring-unsubscribe@egroups.com>.

Spanish project revived: Due to some unexpected hindrances, the translation project has been stalled. But now there is a renewed determination to expedite it. If you are capable and willing to help put *Free In Christ* into Spanish, or help put the manuscript into camera-ready copy, please contact Robert Acosta at <Robert-Acosta@EdisonMission.Com>, Ph.: 949-798-7401, or 22322 Kirkwood, Lake Forest, CA 92630.

Church growth in India: "The number of members of the church in India is at the point of passing U.S. membership totals. At a recent annual India conference it was estimated that there are 25,000-plus preachers in that country." (Christian Chronicle, August 1999.) That amazing news emphasizes the opportunity for sending books there. The preachers are eager for books. The 1000 copies of the Telugu version of *Free In Christ* is hardly a drop in the bucket of need, especially noting that India now has reached one billion in population. We should supply them an unlimited source of grace-oriented materials. I am confident you will continue to work with me to help supply a bit of it.

Books are powerful tools. Your testimonials confirm that truth emphatically. Books are one of the least expensive and most practical methods of teaching. Recently, a brother ordered a set of my five books, plus *The Death of the Custodian*

and *The Twisted Scriptures* for each of ten members of his family! At \$42.00 per set, he considered it a profitable investment in the spiritual life of his family.

Has *Free In Christ* helped you? If so, why not give copies to others who are willing to read it? If you wish to pass along more of the books than you can afford to pay for, just ask for them, and we will send them free for distribution. All you need is the concern. You are our advertisers!

Several years ago I reprinted Carl Ketcherside's *The Death of the Custodian*, and just now I have re-read it. What a powerful little book! For a person with our traditional view of law, this book can be life-changing. Many have testified to that. The \$5.00 (plus postage) cost of this study of the covenants can be multiplied a thousand fold in value. If you wish to read it and cannot afford the cost, I will send you a free copy. I plead with elders and teachers to study this twelve-lesson material with your congregation. It can change the way the congregation views the new covenant Scriptures.

Our "congregation" has grown beyond estimation since leaving the pulpit and starting this ministry. Too many of my listeners, I fear, were a sort of captive audience attending to fulfill a duty. You who read my stuff do it by choice. You who donate to pay for this work are full partners in it. \$4,596.83 is in the work fund now which should care for the Spanish printing. This enterprise costs less than a fourth of the salary of a congregational minister! I receive no salary from your donations.

It is puzzling to me that some who profess greatest spirituality with the Holy Spirit in the "inner man" (Eph. 3:16) rely so heavily on physical feelings for confirmation.

I was wrong on two counts! First, for many years I thought that women were inherently ashamed to display their unclothed or scantily-clad bodies. I have been proven wrong! Well, not all women are brazen, but it seems that most all who think their bodies are beautiful are willing to expose them to the gaze of the public. Second, for some years I have been predicting that by the end of the century frontal nudity on TV would be common. But I missed it by about a square foot of fabric! Mark Twain quipped that man is the only animal that can blush – or needs to. Do we need to, or are we just animals?

There is no record in the Scriptures of one believer calling another disciple a *Christian*.

Somebody evidently decided that our songs should all be praise to God, and that seems to be the trend now. I have always been in favor of praising God but not at the exclusion of other purposes of singing. Now, I would ask, just when are we to be "addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" (Eph. 5:19) if it is not done in the assemblies? Or has the Delete key been hit on that exhortation through modern translations?

With delight some anticipate a supposed "rapture" when they will be caught up from those about them who are unsaved. Would I not be a bit selfish to find glee in such an expectation if the ones being left behind are my loved ones? Or any doomed person?

The word *Christian* is not used in the Scriptures as an adjective, such as Christian people, a Christian school, or Christian literature.

A "Hands On" Creator

Preachers learn to "let sleeping dogs lie" as far as some subjects are concerned. From my teenage years I understood that Jesus made *real wine* and that its proper use

was common among ancient people of God, but for me to have stood in the pulpit and taught that, I would have had to anticipate a career change! However, when I taught the Biblical perspective of the use of wine in my second book, *Free To Speak*, response indicated that most disciples already believed that and were not averse to a “little wine” or an occasional beer. They just could not teach it!

In similar manner, to leave an option that God could have created all things in a process rather than instantaneously would leave the preacher with no option other than an instantaneous career change. Having already made that career change, I began in my second book also to throw out questions about the absolutely literal interpretation of the Genesis account of creation which rejects any possibility of an extended process of creation. Later I published other articles suggesting that God just may continue to refine his creative work. My readers have either considered me hopeless or already were believing those things, for very little negative response has been received.

My purpose in writing about the method or process that God used in creating all things is not to promote a dogmatic answer. Scientists certainly cannot prove evolution, but neither can we prove that we were brought into existence by a divine power either instantaneously or progressively. We have to weigh evidences on which to base faith, and even then we are likely to decide in favor of what we want to believe. Faith is not the fruit of proof but of evidence that falls short of proof. Even while believing in creation, since the details are not specified in Scripture, we must allow others to have their own opinions. “Let everyone be fully convinced in his own mind.” (Rom. 14:5). That does not indicate that we must all be convinced of the same thing in non-essential matters.

The Galatians were preaching “another gospel” when they proclaimed salvation by “the gospel-plus.” If we add our plus to the gospel, we are doing the same thing if our plus is a scientific opinion.

A person can hold opinions about predestination without being a Calvinist, or opinions about salvation by faith without being Lutheran, or opinions about the process of creation without being a “Darwinist” or “naïve creationist.” Those are prejudicial terms used to categorize persons unfairly.

As far back as 65 years ago when I was a teenager, my teachers drilled me in the concepts of instantaneous creation and changeless “natural laws” initiated by God. Science was commonly ridiculed and scientists who disagreed with us were arrogantly denounced as being dishonest and evilly motivated. There could be no middle ground. None dared to allow more than six literal days or for a continuing process of God’s work in his creation, which might include his directing and shaping it.

The sincere disciples of my upbringing held to some facets of deism. A deist denies the interference of the Creator with the laws of the universe. Denying that God or the Spirit would work separate from the Word left the creation without God’s interaction with his universe. He had set the universe in order and then had a “hands off” policy. Although we prayed for God to “guide, guard, and direct us” and to heal the sick, we actually were indecisive about his interference with the natural laws of the universe. Our concepts of creation fitted into that way of thinking.

While disallowing such interaction of God with the created universe, even the most conservative and fundamental disciples have had to make some concessions. God supplied water to cover the entire earth above the 17,650 foot height of Mount Ararat, for example. After the flood previously herbivorous animals, fowls, and sea creatures were changed to be carnivorous. God made the “sun stand still” for a day. Certain

ones were raised from the dead, many were healed, and others were taken up without dying.

All of the many miracles in the Biblical record were instances of God intervening with the natural order. Unless we are deists, we grant that God is still shaping and changing the earth and universe for we can see those things happening. Why then can we not grant the possibility that God has added biological variations and upgraded members from one species to a new one by his creative power through the ages?

Since no power could force the Almighty One to create this vast universe and its inhabitants, we may assume that he did it for his delight. It is not beyond reason that he has continued to find pleasure in producing unending diversities in color, shape, size, texture, substance, and activity in enhancing the work of his hands. To contemplate that he might have flung out a few more heavenly bodies each day for a billion years could do nothing less than instill greater awe in us.

If the Genesis account is all literal, then we are limited by the declaration that God completed the whole creative project in six literal days (Gen. 2:1-3). Consider, however, that you and I would be non-existent if that were literally true.

Because the Eternal One had no beginning, we must conclude that the first sentence of the Bible means *in the beginning of creation* or as the RSV footnote reads, *when God began to create*. That first sentence covers all of the creating of the elements of this universe from nothingness. From there on, God used existing material to make-form-create. For example, he made-formed-created man of the dust (material elements, mostly water!).

In the record of God’s initial work, *create* (1:1; 1:27), *make* (1:16), and *formed* (2:7; 1 Tim. 2:13) are used interchangeably. Those three terms are used to reveal how individuals came into existence in history – *created* (Mal. 2:10), *made* (Psa. 119:73; 139:14-15), *formed* (Psa. 139:13). So all creation was not finished in six days for we are included. You and I, like Adam, are formed of the dust also (Ecc. 3:20; 12:7; Job 34:15). God still creates-makes-forms us, not instantaneously, but by a process of development in our mothers’ wombs. He is a “hands on” creator. We are proof of that.

Most that I have read by disciples dealing with the subject ignore or twist the concept of God’s extended process of creation through development and change. I do not know a Christian who believes in “random, purposeless, natural processes,” “random changes and blind sifting of natural selection,” and/or a “completely mechanistic and material system,” which leaves God out. There are no believing atheists. But some believers do allow that God could have used the “natural laws” which he inaugurated and also to have intervened or made deviations at points in time, thus developing the vast number of species and variations. We need not seek that elusive “missing link” between species for the Creator might initiate those abrupt changes as he wills.

Belief in God’s continued supervision and interventions in creation allows us to believe that he works in our lives and, conversely, belief that he works in our lives allows us to accept his “hands on” supervision and intervention in the universe. The Creator is a “hands on” God. Otherwise, prayer becomes a fruitless exercise.

This is brief. The subject is far-reaching. You are free to form your own opinions about it. The only dogmatic claim of this essay is that we must not be dogmatic about this subject. []

Religion in Our Schools

Tragedies in our schools are making the international news. Disruptive classrooms are lowering the quality of education. Neither morals nor discipline can be taught or demanded. Our educational systems are accused of corrupting our society.

What is the cause of all of these problems? Prohibition of prayer and Bible reading in the schools? Removal of posters of the Ten Commandments? Schools no longer teaching religion? Non-concerned teachers? Those are superficial, reactionary assessments.

My home town of Rochester, Texas was established in 1906, just twelve years before I was born. In those days most of the school teachers were unmarried women. Their contract with the school board included these stipulations:

1. You will not marry during the term of your contract.
2. You are not to keep company with men.
3. You must be home between the hours of 3:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m., unless attending a school function.
4. You may not loiter downtown in ice cream stores.
5. You may not travel beyond the city limits, unless you have permission of the chairman of the board.
6. You may not ride in a carriage or automobile with any man, unless he is your father or brother.
7. You may not smoke cigarettes.
8. You may not dress in bright colors.
9. You may under no circumstance dye your hair.
10. You must wear at least two petticoats.
11. Your dresses must not be any shorter than two inches above the ankle.
12. To keep the school room neat and clean, you must: sweep the floor once a day; scrub the floor once a week with hot soapy water; clean the blackboards once a day; start the fire at 7:00 a.m. so the room will be warm by 8:00 a.m.

Perhaps, you noticed the absence of something in those rules. Where does it mention religion, prayer, Ten Commandments, or Bible reading, much less any mention of Christmas or Easter programs?

It has never been the aim of public schools to teach religion. They are not qualified to teach it. When specific schools have taken the liberty to teach matters of religion, it has usually been religious people who have objected because their particular sectarian beliefs were not the ones being taught. I think *my people* would have objected to having the Ten Commandments posted lest kids be taught to keep the Sabbath!

The only times I recall prayer or Bible reading in the Rochester school was in our rare assemblies and graduation exercises. So we were always having school shootings and attacks on teachers. Well, more like blowing hackberry seed through a test tube pea-shooter, or firing a paper wad by a rubber band while the teacher's head was turned.

It takes a village to raise and educate a child, we hear. We have plenty of villages, many being metropolitan. It takes more than that, we are proving disastrously. *It takes a village that has morals and character!* Our schools reflect the social, moral, and religious character of our communities, which in turn, reflect the social, moral, and religious character of the individuals and homes making up the communities. That is the simple diagnosis, but the corrective cure is so complex as to make it seem unattainable.

One of these influences, however, is repressed by law. Since the Christian religion predominates in our society, it is stupid to disallow any influence of it in schools. The non-Christian minorities should have enough grace to tolerate the majority for the common good rather than selfishly demand a

godless school system. Our founding fathers certainly did not have the current concept of "separation of church and State" in mind. They established our nation on the concept of God's sovereignty. Now, all manner of non-religious and anti-religious things are allowed in school, but not belief in God.

We are not campaigning for a reinstatement of the rules for teachers listed above. Yet that list reflects the strictness of the cultural code of the community which produced law-abiding, goal-oriented children on through World War II. It was a village of strong families whose parents knew with whom their children associated, who gave them work to do, and gave them purpose and direction in life. There was religious life, strong work ethic, and basic morality almost enforced by the watchful eye of neighbors who knew and cared about each other. No, there was no perfection, but there certainly was restraint. Growing up there, I knew of very few divorces or extra-marital affairs. To have become pregnant or to bear a child out of wedlock would have been a tragic disgrace for the mother and two families. I never saw a person drinking liquor or a woman smoking or wearing shorts. Yes, some crimes were committed, but under the watchful eye of family, kin, and neighbors, they were uncommon and, to spare the family from additional shame and avoid making criminality look heroic, the misdemeanors were not reported in the local newspaper.

You probably felt a condescending amusement when you read the list of rules for teachers four generations ago. That is to be expected, for each generation feels that way about the standards of the previous one. So each generation has liberated itself from the restrictions of the previous one in a steady decline and lack of definition of ethics, morality, and character. Not one of those rules would be acceptable today, and very few rules of conduct are made for the citizens of our communities. Every limitation is tested by those demanding personal freedom for any and all forms of licentious conduct. Our society defends the "rights" of all persons to be as immoral and irresponsible as they wish to be. About the only rule left is against your speaking out against the lifestyle of anyone else. So, what can we expect of our schools in such a society? The fruit cannot be better than the tree that bears it, and the school, rather than bearing all the blame, only reflects the society that supports it.

In the middle of this century millions of tracts were distributed which exhorted, "A Better World Begins With Me!" There is the key. The very title carries the answer. Don't expect the legislators, universities, television, and movie producers to create the moral village. They could be a tremendous influence, but too many of them are social activists to bring change, and they respond to the popular demands of a licentious society. So we must start back at square one.

Why not have a big demonstration in Washington? That might be noticeable but of little substance. Change must begin with you and me!

Do you pray and read the Bible at home? Do you involve your children in it? Are you fully involved in their activities with peers, at school, at home, at church? Do you supervise their television and video games? Do you teach them responsibility and industry? If you don't, how can you ask or expect the school or social programs to do it? It is your responsibility. Just as you inoculate your children against prevalent diseases, you can nurture them to stand among their peers in their society. They, like Daniel, can walk among the lions without fear. They can be role models for other students who have less caring parents.

Your children may still pray at school any time they wish. I doubt if schools would forbid them having a Bible in their

possession or reading it in study hall. Don't many schools still permit before-school activities of Christian student groups? Schools should not be expected to sponsor private religious activities any more than our government does.

From the home you can then expand your activity and influence. You may work to influence individuals, churches, schools, community projects, elected officials, and the media. There are many other persons in all these components of our society who are eager to improve our society. They need your support and leadership rather than government sponsorship.

Let us work positively for good rather than just being critical and pointing the finger of blame toward others. A better world begins with me! Better schools begin with me! []

What I Hear From You

<>Brother Hook, I just finished reading all five of your books, very carefully. They were a lot to digest for a 43-year-old man who has never known anything but traditional Church of Christ doctrine. But I found your arguments refreshing and I found myself agreeing with almost everything you said! My thinking has changed so much, thanks to your fine efforts. I truly feel free for the first time in my life. God bless your efforts. Surely His Spirit is working through you. -David Sanders <sandman@cafes.net>, Shelbyville, TN.

<>Love your books. We worship at Oak Hills Church of Christ (San Antonio). I know your books have influenced many at this church! -Gary Pieratt <gapieratt@cs.com> Castroville, TX.

<>Cecil, Thank you so much for taking the time to write your books. They have inspired me and many of my close friends. As I am reminded, and also proud, my daughters are fifth generation Church of Christ members. That doesn't take away the urge I feel to see us escape from legalism. It is time we move ahead. I am afraid I disagree with the still living second, third and some fourth generation family members. Thanks for your wisdom. -Steve Stow <Stowbabies@aol.com> Modesto, CA.

<>I have been in the Christian Church for the past 22 years and am a student of the Restoration Movement. Your ministry is going a long way to further that ideal. Thank you for your efforts and may God continue to bless your work. - Steve Widener <aaii1@surfree.com> Hot Springs Village, AR.

<>Great page. We need more like it out here in computer land. -Valeri <uncom_valeri@yahoo.com> Gainesboro, TN.

<>Dear Cecil, Thanks again for the continuing blessing we receive through your ministry. -Ruth and Keith Skillicorn, <rkskilli@dove.mtx.net.au>, Modbury, SA Australia.

<>I was raised in the Church of Christ – a so-called “anti” church. I am currently a faithful practicing Catholic studying to be ordained a priest. I have great love for the Church of Christ, and I salute the work done on this website to bring the Church of Christ into fellowship with other Christians. On my own site, which is dedicated to the Church of Christ / Roman Catholic dialogue (and which, admittedly, is of a pro-Catholic apologetic nature), I have decided to feature Freedom's Ring ministry. -Jeff Childers, <imfangio2@juno.com>. Joliet, IL.

<>I have been a member of the church since I was 18. I have preached since 1956. With the permission of the Sunset elders I began the Extension School of the Sunset School of Preaching. The longer I live and the more I study, the less I know for sure. I appreciate your efforts to bring us to grace. -Charles Wilson <cwilson616@aol.com> Madison, AL.

<>Your site was mentioned as helpful by a fellow-divorced individual; and I have enjoyed browsing through! Thanks for your insights. --Janet Bray <jbrayn@mailexcite.com> Rogers, NM.

<>About 20 families started a new family of God back in January. We are a tolerant group of Christians who are bound only by God's word and not by tradition. We have a mixture of traditional and contemporary worship. We are a family who believes in freedom in Christ and are not bound by legalistic doctrine. We are now over 100 and are outgrowing our present facility. -Mike Norfleet <norfleet@prodigy.net> Hot Springs, AR.

<>God bless your work (“blessed are the peace makers”). I find your books refreshing and thought provoking. -Danny Vaughn <DanVonn@ftp.concentric.net> Edmond, OK.

<>Since I have discovered the Power of the Indwelling Holy Spirit, I have been called “strange and crazy” by members who don't understand the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit. In my discouragement, I was pointed to your site. Thank you for making a difference in bringing the power of the Truth and making a difference through it. -Holly Walker <HollysHoly@aol.com> Shreveport, LA.

<>Enjoyed reading the articles. -Fred Mealio <<fmealio@scican.net> Paragon, IN.

<>I know I am not the first to take a stand with you on leaving our legalistic ways and returning to the grace of God. Your web page is very inspiring to me as a Christian who has seen the church of Christ divided over politics, race, institutionalism, music, progress, and primitivism. I can honestly say that since I started attending Southern Christian University two years ago and learned about our hermeneutics, I was completely surprised. I support your efforts and pray with you that we can all reach a unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. -Brother Arthur Glover <aglover@eagnet.com>

<>Greetings, fellow liberators. May God continue to bless your work, Brother Cecil. -Lee Wilson <thundersbe@aol.com> Florence, AL.

“In Other Words”

Welcome with open arms fellow believers who don't see things the way you do. And don't jump all over them every time they do or say something you don't agree with – even when it seems that they are strong on opinions but weak in the faith department. Remember, they have their own history to deal with. Treat them gently.

For instance, a person who has been around for a while might well be convinced that he can eat anything on the table, while another, with a different background, might assume all Christians should be vegetarians and eat accordingly. But since both are guests at Christ's table, wouldn't it be terribly rude if they fell to criticizing what the other are or didn't eat? God, after all, invited them both to the table. Do you have any business crossing people off the guest list or interfering with God's welcome? If there are corrections to be made or manners to be learned, God can handle that without your help.

Or, say, one person thinks that some days should be set aside as holy and another thinks that each day is pretty much like any other. There are good reasons either way. So, each person is free to follow the convictions of conscience.

What's important in all this is that if you keep a holy day, keep it for God's sake; if you eat meat, eat it to the glory of God and thank God for prime rib; if you're a vegetarian, eat vegetables to the glory of God and thank God for broccoli. None of us are permitted to insist on our own way in these matters. It's God we are answerable to – all the way from life to death and everything in between – not each other. That's

why Jesus lived and died and then lived again: so that he could be our Master across the entire range of life and death, and free us from the petty tyrannies of each other.

So where does that leave you when you criticize a brother? I'd say it leaves you looking pretty silly – or worse. Eventually, we're all going to end up kneeling side by side in the place of judgment, facing God. Your critical and condescending ways aren't going to improve your position there one bit. Read it for yourself in Scripture:

“As I live and breath,’ God says,
‘every knee will bow before me;
Every tongue will tell the honest truth
that I and only I am God.”

So tend to your knitting. You've got your hands full just taking care of your own life before God.

Forget about deciding what's right for each other. Here's what you need to be concerned about: that you don't get in the way of someone else, making life more difficult than it already is. I'm convinced – Jesus convinced me! -- that everything as it is in itself is holy. We, of course, by the way we treat it or talk about it, can contaminate it.

If you confuse others by making a big issue over what they eat or don't eat, you're no longer a companion with them in love, are you? These, remember, are persons for whom Christ died. Would you risk sending them to hell over an item in their diet? Don't you dare let a piece of God-blessed food become an occasion of soul-poisoning!

God's kingdom isn't a matter of what you put in your stomach, for goodness' sake. It's what God does with your life as he sets it right, puts it together, and completes it with joy. Your task is to single-mindedly serve Christ. Do that and you'll kill two birds with one stone: pleasing the God above you and proving your worth to the people around you.

So let's agree to use all our energy in getting along with each other. Help others with encouraging words; don't drag them down by finding fault. You're certainly not going to permit an argument over what is served or not served at supper to wreck God's work among you, are you? I said before and I'll say it again: All food is good, but it can turn bad if you use it badly, if you use it to trip others up and send them sprawling. When you sit down to a meal, your primary concern should not be to feed your own face but to share the life of Jesus. So be sensitive and courteous to the others who are eating. Don't eat or say or do things that might interfere with the free exchange of love.

Cultivate your own relationship with God, but don't impose it on others. You're fortunate if your behavior and your belief are coherent. But if you're not sure, if you notice that you are acting in ways inconsistent with what you believe – some days trying to impose your opinions on others, other

days just trying to please them – then you know you're out of line. If the way you live isn't consistent with what you believe, then it's wrong.

(In case you did not recognize that: it is Romans 14 from *The Message*, The New Testament in Contemporary English, by Eugene Peterson.) []