

FREEDOM'S RING

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

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The Gospel Plus What?

Questions: How long could the Ethiopian Treasurer have served God acceptably in Ethiopia without prophets or epistles? With Stephen dying a generation before any epistle was written, was he saved? Is there any essential added to the gospel that was unknown on Pentecost?

To avoid suspense, I will go ahead and answer those questions. There is no new essential to salvation in addition to what Jesus had taught and the apostles taught on Pentecost. There was no essential that Stephen or the eunuch lacked.

In the last chapter in *Free In Christ*, I related the account of the conversion of the Ethiopian Treasurer. Philip "told him the good news about Jesus" and baptized him in response to his faith. Immediately after his obedience to the gospel, the Spirit caught up Philip, and the eunuch went on his way rejoicing.

He went back to his land where the gospel had not gone. There were no believers to meet with, no prophet to teach him, and no epistles to guide him. He had only some of the Old Covenant scriptures. He did not know about "the five acts of worship," the nature and work of the church, and all the supposed rules and regulations relating to being a *Christian*. He didn't even know about being a "Christian" for no one had ever used that designation at that time. Please read that chapter again.

The gospel "is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16). Those who would believe it and be baptized were promised salvation (Mark 16:16). Peter and the apostles proclaimed it on Pentecost leading to the remission of sins of 3000 people. Philip "told him the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:35). The gospel is more than words and facts. They were not saved by words and facts. Factually, the gospel is epitomized as the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. However, we are saved by Jesus who himself is the Good News.

The saving gospel was proclaimed effectively long before any epistle was written. Nothing has been added to it since Pentecost. The apostolic letters were no part of it. Those letters were written for the benefit of those already saved by means of the gospel. Those epistles were intended to produce fruits of conduct in accordance to and consistent with the

gospel, but they are not the gospel (1 Tim. 1:9; Phil. 1:17). If all the New Covenant writings are the saving message, then all

must understand and obey everything in them in order to be saved. That would have excluded the church in Jerusalem. That would leave all of us out! (Please read *Free In Christ*, Ch. 8 and *The Twisted Scriptures*, by Carl Ketcherside, Ch. 4).

To assert that the apostles and prophets taught orally everything that was in the epistles previous to their being written is without foundation. Those were personal letters to specific people. Prophets might have taught all the principles involved in the epistles, but Jesus had already taught those principles before the prophets.

Without the epistles, we would not know of the command to assemble on the first day of each week to worship, you may be thinking. Where do you find such a command in the epistles? It is not there! It is through our specious logic that we have formulated such a command. Would those who shared a like faith and hope need a command in order to insure their association together? Hardly. Jesus anticipated such associations in *Matthew* 18:15-20.

We are not dependent upon Paul to learn about the Communion. In giving his corrective teaching about abuses of it in Corinth, he recalls Jesus' instruction, "Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me" (1 Cor. 11:25). There is no word in the Scriptures that binds a certain time or frequency or inclusiveness of the group participating. In the context of their setting in the Passover observance, it is likely that *as often* would have been interpreted to mean *annually*. We have made and bound our own divisive rules as essentials to pleasing God.

Were it not for the epistles, you may say, we would not be limited to "the five acts of worship" in our assemblies. In the first place, the Scriptures do not call for assemblies for the purpose of worship. In the second place, disciples are not limited to five expressions of worship, but all that they do is to serve and honor God. Jesus accepted various "unauthorized" direct expressions of homage recorded in the Gospels. In all Bible history there is no record of God refusing the expressions of praise and worship of humble and sincere worshipers regardless of what forms they took. In spite of that, most of the divisions among those in the Stone-Campbell Movement have been due to our making essential laws regarding rituals of worship.

Appointment of elders and deacons over congregations is not mentioned in the Gospels, so that is an essential we learn from the epistles, you may be thinking. Where did you get the idea that our eternal welfare is dependent upon appointing elders and deacons? Surely, one would have to do a lot of reading between the lines to make

congregational organization an essential to acceptance by God. What about those in the congregations where Timothy and Titus were instructed to appoint elders -- were they unsaved until elders were appointed? How eager we have been to make laws for God!

Another objection may be that we learn of giving into the treasury of the church by collections on the first day of each week only from Paul's letter (1 Cor. 16:1-2). That refers to a one-time pick-up of money by Paul from persons who saved up money until he came for it. Even in the epistles there is no mention of a sustained giving of money into the treasury of a congregation. Jesus had much to say about the wise use of our money, but he specified no amount or organized collection and use of it by his disciples as binding universally.

God's timeless law (principle of action, not a code) is love toward him and our fellow man. It is the principle of action written in the heart which the eunuch could always know and follow. It is the universal, unchanging principle. To those who groaned under the yoke of the code given through Moses, Micah emphasized the simplicity of God's expectations of them: "He has showed you. O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8).

Jesus' covenant was new, but his principle of action was a repetition of God's requirement to love God and man. He declared, "On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets" (Matt. 22:40).

Is the epitomizing of God's expectations of us dangerous because it leaves out rituals? There is no sacramental value in rituals. The value to be received by the disciple from rituals and services is the strength he gains from the learning and spiritual exercise and mutual edification. He is not justified by them, nor are they measures of his righteousness. They are of value as they nurture faith and encourage the participant to fulfill the timeless law of love for God and man. Rituals are not what God requires of us, but they are a means to an end, to help us to do his eternal will to love. Splitting hairs as to how, when, and with whom to perform acceptable rituals is a misdirection defeating their very purpose.

Ideally, the treasurer will influence his family and friends so that they will develop accepting faith in Christ. Then in their discipleship together, they will engage in such activities as will strengthen their faith and encourage them in fulfilling God's timeless law in their lives. The New Testament Scriptures, which are of special blessing to us, will not be necessary as they continue to call on their God in Christ. They will look to no activities of theirs for any sacramental or meritorious value and look upon no pattern of conformity as sacred. Each will serve God in his individual relationship with God and others. Collectively, they will be Christ's church, free from all of our theological conceptions and misconceptions about it. That could work for the Ethiopian -- and for us!

The eunuch would be deprived of Paul's great lessons concerning justification by faith, God's eternal purpose in the church, his predestination and election, the indwelling of the Spirit, spiritual gifts, and his explanation of the meaning of

baptism. But so was the first generation of disciples. Were they lost without understanding those great theological matters? Paul gave no indication of such.

A traveler may stop at a crossroads and inquire, "How do I get to Paradise Camp?" The reply may be, "Take the right-hand road at the intersection and stay on it all the way." There is no mention of distance, terrain, condition of the road, markings along the way, or intersecting roads. After hours of

uncertainty, he finally arrives at his destination with joy. But how much more pleasant his trip would have been if he had instructions and markers all along the way to confirm that he was still on the right road.

The epistles have been described as love-letters written by Paul and others giving correction of course, warnings of dangers, instruction about possible problems, confirmation of faith, and emotional encouragement to those on the road to Paradise. The traveler is already on the right road before he receives these letters. They are most helpful as he travels the road of faith even though he may not understand all in them and may not know how to interpret some of the directions. Nevertheless, he is assured that Paradise is ahead. The apostolic writings help but they offer no new route.

Having said all this, we affirm that there is great liberty among believers in various ages, cultures, and communities to utilize programs, procedures, and personnel that are considered most effective in serving the needs of the disciples involved. These should all be a means to the end of upbuilding and functioning of the group with no demands of conformity of various congregations. The church is a living entity, and living things change in outward manifestation while maintaining their original basic identity.

This is another call to search for the simplicity of God's way for us. Throughout the ages, traditional interpretations have obscured the route to God and encrusted the image of God's congregation so that we find it difficult to identify. We have taken what should be personal relationships with our Creator and forged them into a complicated system of doctrinal correctness, institutional organization, authoritarian leadership, sacramental rituals, and mediatorial function. In this pervasive process the unity of believers has been destroyed.

Christ's body which we call the church was, and always will be, produced by the Gospel plus nothing -- not even the apostolic writings. Those communications deal with expediencies in the function of followers of Christ. The person who adds an essential makes it into "another gospel" and comes under Paul's anathema.

Let us no longer add our individual conviction to the gospel.

(Other related thoughts are in *Free To Accept*, Chapters 16, 17, 18, 19.) []

The Extent of Fellowship

Inquiries continue to come regarding the extent of our fellowship. Should it include only those who agree in your group, all the fragmented groups of the Stone-Campbell Movement, all who immerse "for the remission of sins," all who immerse in obedience to Christ, and/or the broader scope of believers? If the answer were simple, we would not still have questions. Two volumes rather than two columns are needed to treat this subject.

If we give acceptance and approval to any and all who make some far-fetched claim to being children of God, then Christianity becomes meaningless. However, recognition of persons as followers of Christ is not necessarily an approval of all they believe and practice.

Let us begin by recognizing that our fellowship is with individuals rather than church groups or systems of doctrinal interpretation. All who are saved in Christ are in fellowship. God, not we, creates the united fellowship. God has not received us due to our being in "the right church." He, rather

than the church (people), is the center in whom we are fellows. That unity with God is in spite of our diversity, for no individual or church is without fault. Justification means that we are accounted as right when we are not!

After his exhortation in *Romans* 14 for non-judgmental acceptance of other disciples who have differing convictions, Paul further requires, "Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you" (15:7). Since no one can claim to have been accepted by Christ on the ground of his goodness, freedom from sin, full knowledge of all truth, and doctrinal correctness, a person dare not demand those qualities of others. He is misguided, prejudiced, and conceited in attempting to do it. That has not kept us from doing it, however!

Although we in the Stone-Campbell Movement have splintered into numerous rejecting groups, various groups consider the very name *Church of Christ* to be a sort of holy umbrella for acceptance. In any congregation, in any group, there is not uniformity of doctrinal beliefs, spiritual growth, or moral conduct. Yet, because they are in "the right church," they are accepted in fellowship. Can a person be in such a group without approving, sanctioning, and condoning those conditions?

Since "erring brethren" are the only kind that exist, we have no choice than to be in fellowship with them. But there is a difference between fellowship and approving, sanctioning, and condoning. A person who disavows the sins practiced by others of his fellowship is not guilty of their sins. Otherwise we could not be in fellowship with anyone else, unless we found a perfect person(s). And there's no chance of that. Believers are all sinners accounted as perfect by the grace of God. (I have not jotted prooftexts, for you are familiar with the Scriptures.)

Regardless of the group they may be in, there are three things preventing the fellowship of individuals. Flagrant immorality and idolatry (2 Cor. 5:9-12) is contrary to our call for sanctification, hence, they are intolerable. Denial of the basis of our salvation, like denying that Christ came in the flesh (2 John 7-11). We are saved by the Gospel (not the apostolic writings); so denial of any factor of the Gospel is a denial of the basis of salvation. Since God makes us one in Him, a person who binds his interpretative convictions on others becomes a rejecting factionalist, thus creating division, which is destructive God's work (Titus 3:9-11).

The scores of differing beliefs within your group are minor, you may think, but there are weightier matters that prevent fellowship with those in other groups. Well, let us compare, or contrast, some of our "errors"! Of the "They" and "We" choices listed below, which are better or worse?

They do not fully understand the purpose of baptism.
None of us fully understands all the purposes of baptism. Neither did early converts understand fully, for *Romans* 6:3-4

and *Colossians* 2:11-14 were explanations written to people who had already baptized.

They claim salvation by faith apart from works but then obey.
Many of us claim salvation through obedience to a supposed code of law. Which course is further off course?

Others wear names like *Church of God* or *Assembly of God*.
We wear the name *Church of Christ*. One is a Biblical as the other, but no name is given for the saved (church) to wear.

They make use of choirs, solos, quartets, etc. in worship.
We have insisted on congregational singing exclusively, making silence of Scriptures into law. Paul makes a better case for solos than congregational singing (1 Cor. 14:26).

They let women in proper decorum pray and prophesy in the assembly. (1 Cor. 11)

We dogmatically forbid women to pray and prophesy in assemblies in spite of Scriptural permission.

Others recognize a unity in spite of diversity of convictions.
We, while being diverse in our congregations, have demanded unity by conformity to the particular scruples prevailing in that congregation.

That is enough to illustrate the point. Now, who is "righter" – They or We? Neither can boast of being so right as to be accepted because of it. If we are accepted at all, it will be by grace rather than our correctness. So why should I reject others because I think they are off course on interpretations while I depend upon God to accept me in spite of my misinterpretations? We are not giving license here to insincerity or arrogance before God. We are speaking of humble believers serving God to the best of their understanding – just as you do.

I have the right to my own conscience but not the right to bind my convictions on others. When others do things in religion my conscience will not allow me to do, I do not have to participate with them in violation of my conscience. However, others cannot violate my conscience; only I can do that. I can teach what I think is right, but if I bind my convictions on others I become a divisive judge making law of my interpretation. It is not the person who eats meat (exercises his liberty), for instance, who is divisive, but the person who rejects and condemns him for eating meat is the divisive one (Read *Romans* 14 again!). It has been hard for us to face that fact.

Isn't it funny that groups who may deny fellowship with Baptists, for example, are overjoyed for them to visit their services and participate fully. Brothers and sisters, that also is fellowship!

It is high time for us who have claimed to be a unity movement to take some conciliatory steps. Individually, we may express disagreement with persons of other churches (and in our own!) while emphatically expressing loving acceptance of them as fellow servants of the same God and Savior. We can let the same God who judges our own flaws and those in our own group take care of the judging of their individual flaws.

Our congregations should reach out to the Assembly of God across the street and the Baptist Church down the street and apologize for our rejecting and opposing them. We can let them know that doctrinal differences will no longer prevent us from working with them as a united force in accomplishing God's work on earth. Such unity of action glorifies the God whom we all serve rather than the denominations in which we may be serving. []

Hook's Points

If the Lord sees fit for me to continue this publication, we will be into the year 2000 by the time you receive the next issue. There has been so much hype about it that most of us will probably be glad to get the entry into 2000 A.D. behind us as we actually begin the last year of this century and millennium. There are many more important things to challenge us. No doubt, many deaths related to the year 2000 will occur on January 1. I anticipate none will be due to the YK2 bug, but to drunken celebrations around the world.

It is a time of both excitement and pain among my people in the COC. God is working exciting good change among us. There is a healthy trend focusing more on Christ and less on doctrinal correctness. A younger generation is not

interested in doctrinal disputes but they want strength and support that comes through relationship. But change is always resisted resulting in turmoil. It is a painful time for preachers who depend upon the favor of the congregation for financial support while they try to bring reform. People must be cherished above individual interpretations. Patience and prayer are essential.

If you just get the last five minutes of a sermon, you will weigh the speaker's conclusions by your previous understanding rather than the basis he presented for his lesson. Thus, you learn nothing from him. So it is with your reading *Freedom's Ring* if you have not read *Free In Christ* and my other books first. Many current articles are based on what I wrote in those books.

Good books always make good gifts! With the holidays coming up, it is good to remember that. A good number of you took my suggestion in last issue to read or use in class Ketcherside's *The Death of the Custodian*. Now try his *The Twisted Scriptures*. That marvelous book turned me around on some vital points of understanding. I used that book in the most exciting class I ever taught.

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\$1,700.00 has been sent to Dr. Prasad for a second printing of FIC in Telugu so that his supply will not run out. Your donations enable that. Thank you!

There is an unexpected hindrance to the distribution of the Telugu version of FIC in India. Transportation! We take transportation and mail delivery for granted. Dr. Prasad has not so much as a motor bike to reach the villages. He can hardly afford public transportation, and it does not serve many villages. Some are reached by oxcart! Someone could really "spread his wings" by the gift of a motor bike. He converted 25 on his most recent trip.

Some in India are fluent in English. For their use in training schools and libraries, in October we have sent a mail bag of 116 books, including sets of twelve each of a number of our books. Those books are your gifts to them. Thank you.

76 free copies of Free In Christ were distributed in October. Our work fund now stands at \$1,807.43.

It is a sad comment on our society that public money is spent promoting the gambling craze, touting it as being beneficial to our people. While a small bet may not be evil as

such, I pity the person who has no higher aim for the use of what God gives him than to feed it into a slot machine – or to squander it on any other sort of non-satisfying behavior.

Did you pay for those books you ordered from me? I am accusing no one, but I have quite a number of tagged files awaiting receipt of payment. Some date back to previous years.

The congregation in New Braunfels, Texas is celebrating its 80th anniversary. We served there ten years and lived there another eleven, more than a quarter of its history. The congregation grew an average of 4 or 5 members per year. Hardly sensational.

Unsolved mystery: Why parents will spend big money to straighten their teenagers' teeth when the kids' studied aim is to look like a circus side-show freak by hair style, dress, body

piercings, tattoos, and clothing emblazoned with bizarre messages.

Another puzzler: Why Oregon gives doctors permission to kill patients who want to commit suicide but takes all precaution to prevent Kip Kinkel, the Springfield school killer, from committing suicide which he wants to do.

Worship As Commanded

"Knowing that my whole self is given as worship, I don't see the importance of going to assemblies to worship." "Is there a command for us to worship?" "Where do the Scriptures teach that the purpose of assemblies is for worship?" "Are we called to perform rituals of worship or to serve God by serving people?"

Although I am neither the scholar in residence nor the academic answer man, I continue to receive comments and questions like those above from readers. Having little time to devote to each inquiry, my answers are not very thorough. I think most of the inquirers already know the answers to their questions better than I, for they are persons who are making their own restudy of traditional teachings and practices. They want confirmation.

This brief column will add little to what I have already expressed in numerous essays in my books and newsletters. Perhaps, a few re-affirmations will be worthwhile.

When mention is made of the worship of disciples, what image comes to your mind? Does a sort of template modeled after our current assemblies in Protestant America appear? Must any new thought that you may entertain be squeezed in and made to fit that template somehow? Is revision of concepts too tedious, frightening, and unsettling?

From the start here, I will say that I will not even "search the Scriptures" to find a command to worship. Worship commanded, specified, and regulated by law would be a throw-back to Mosaic concepts. It would produce performance of rituals more than expressions of the heart. The heart cannot be commanded; it must be motivated. Love rather than law is the motivation without which all efforts to serve God are vain.

Commands require many attendant specifications and qualifications. A law would have to specify what, how, when, where, with whom, how often, how much, what purpose, and the intention of the worshipper. In earnest effort to please God in supposed commanded worship, we have spun a web of interpretative entanglement like the traditions accumulated around the Law of Moses. We who have approached the New Covenant writings as a code of law have experienced that entrapment. Our efforts to determine all the details of worship and service have led to the splintering of ourselves into many diverse, rejecting groups. And the remedy offered for this evil too often has been, "Be like us and we will be united."

Although we have pieced together a "five-act" system of congregational worship by selecting statements, historical incidents, "laws from silence," assumptions, and supposedly necessary inferences, no precepts or patterns define a system of vertical worship to God with the specifications mentioned in the preceding paragraph. Perhaps we have been influenced more by the corrections of abuse in assemblies (like 1 Cor. 11-14) than by positive instructions – what we can't do rather than what we are free to do. And we have made unwarranted distinction between what we can do personally in daily life honoring God and what we can do collectively, thus making *the worship service* more holy than *the worshipful life*.

Worship is the natural reaction for the person sensitive to an awesome Creator. Though the pagans received no command or instructions as to how to worship, God expected awe from them whether they lived in Sodom, Nineveh, Egypt, or other nations neighboring Israel (Read *Romans*, Ch. 1 &2). They were not informed about rituals or assemblies of worship, but no expression of reverence to the Creator was ever rejected by him. They might not have realized the love of God that we have revealed to us, but they could have his two requirements written in their hearts – to love man and his Creator.

That same awe should produce a worshipful life in all of us. It is an expression of life rather than proper rituals. Surely, we will communicate with God directly, but a ritual or assembly is not necessary for that. And when we are gathered with other worshippers, surely it is appropriate for us to worship together.

Does God command regular assemblies on the first day of each week for worship? There is no such command. Yet we have gathered statements and inferences, molded then together in a pattern, and then made them universally binding by our interpretations.

What about *Hebrews 20:25*, our proof-text for assemblies? God's dreadful day of chastisement was soon to come on God's son, Israel. It would be sore trial for the believing Jews. So the writer of the letter to them encouraged them to be in touch with each other to exhort and encourage one another. Nothing indicates that this was a universal command for all times to meet for ceremonial worship.

This is no effort to negate the value of assembling with others of like faith. "Birds of a feather will flock together" (Mishnah), points to our common interest which will cause us to want to be together. We all feel the need for each other. Even those who feel that they do not need the strength coming from the bodily presence of others will realize that others need the strength they can offer. Gatherings, whether private or public, are free to incorporate whatever activities will edify those present. Those gatherings are a means to an end rather than being the essential thing. Attendance to assemblies and participation in rituals are not the measures of spiritual stature but, if they fulfill their purpose, they will nurture spiritual growth.

The Psalmist is our hero in leading us in praise, yet I doubt if he felt compelled to go to a meeting and sing praises for an hour each Sabbath. Sometimes I wonder, as we go through the rituals again each week, if God might be saying to himself, "That is nice that they want to sing to me, but that is not exactly what I had in mind. I would prefer that they honor me by expressing love to one another and helping all my people on earth. I wish they would read again what I told my people through Micah."

So, let Micah speak again (6:6-8): "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

(For more, read *Free To Accept*, Ch. 17, "Thursday Is The Lord's Day Too!," Chapter 18, "Not Forsaking the Assembly," and Chapter 19, "Acts 20:7 One More Time.") []

Conservative, Liberal, or Whatever

In an entry posted in the Guest Book on my website, a concerned brother declares, "Those who make an honest attempt to match the Bible's teaching to those expressed on this website will be hard pressed to do so." He takes issue with several points indicating that I teach that truth is relative and that I think that conservative belief is legalism.

Another brother, Eric. McLaughlin, responded to the brother and sent me a copy of his message. Thinking that his expressions may help others, I am sharing them with you. The writer of the note signed it, but this is not intended to be confrontational; so I shall not give his name though you may find it in the Guest Book.

Dear brother, I read your message to Cecil Hook about legalism. Are you a member of the "Church of Christ"? If so, you should be aware that there are many things people believe and teach as the "infallible word of God" that are merely traditions. You are attacking this work for something that it never intended to do. TRUTH IS NOT RELATIVE! But Truth taught through the eyes of a legalist IS relative!

The legalist platform has long been the hope of salvation by keeping the right commandments. The pure Gospel is that salvation is a free gift of God's amazing love. I'm sure you have heard the verse "By grace ye are saved through faith." It is true that, to some members of the Church of Christ, Cecil Hook is "liberal" and to some non-denominationalists, Cecil Hook is "conservative." But the main point is not conservatism or liberalism.

The main point -- no matter what denomination you belong to -- is that CHRIST IS GOD AND HE LOVED ALL OF US SO MUCH THAT HE LIVED A PERFECT LIFE, DIED AN INNOCENT MAN, AND ROSE FROM THE DEAD BY HIS OWN POWER. ALL FOR THE PURPOSE OF MAKING US RIGHT BEFORE GOD!!!!

Even though God made the world, He did not come to the world to be glorified in worldly ways. HE CAME FOR THE SOLE PURPOSE OF BRINGING US TO HIMSELF. Legalism has taken this TRUTH and made it fit to man's views.

The message of the gospel is simple but man in his legalism has made the gospel too complicated. You see, legalism and liberalism are not just original to the Church of Christ. It plagues Baptists and Methodists and any other denomination imaginable.

This website "Freedom's Ring" stands for faith in Christ and that salvation comes only through Christ's Love!!! This stand against the bondage of legalism DOES match the Bible's teaching! We can not earn our salvation or improve our status with God by formally observing the Lord's supper every first day of the week, by singing without instruments, by trusting in our baptism to save us, by attending the "right" church. (None of these are biblical practices!)

Legalism refuses to take God at His Word -- AND THAT IS SIN! There is only one way to obtain salvation or to grow in the Lord and that is through Faith in Christ as our all in all.

Christians are being confused! Denominationalism and its cousin legalism are responsible for the state Christianity is in today. The doctrines of foolish men are running many churches. If Christians would have obeyed Christ, there would not be thousands of

different groups in the Christian faith. We are responsible for leading people to Jesus – not indoctrinating them into different sects! Jesus died for all people. Unbelievers, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Catholics, Church of Christ-ians, etc. etc. etc... I urge you to take another look at brother Hook's teachings and carefully examine yourself in the light of God's word. I will pray for you. Please Reply. Eric McLaughlin, Portsmouth, OH, <ericottomclaughlin@yahoo.com>.

Retroactive “Grounds for Divorce”

Some observations and questions about marriage and divorce that merit our attention have come from Joe Hall of the USAF, a reader whom I have not met.

“If an individual is divorced from a guilty party because of fornication and then has sex (with a person who is also outside of marriage) after the marriage has been dissolved, then it would be considered *fornication* because the individual is no longer married to the former spouse and, therefore, could not commit adultery against the former spouse. However, if the guilty divorced spouse has sex outside of marriage, then the traditional position would be that they committed adultery even though they aren't married to anyone anymore. Doesn't a person have to be married in order to commit adultery? And if the divorced guilty party isn't married, how can it be considered adultery if he or she remarries? This seems to be an inconsistency with the traditional approach, yet I've never heard it discussed.”

The point is well taken, in my opinion. No, a person, or persons, cannot adulterate a non-existing marriage. We have been inclined to think of adultery as a sexual act. However, the sexual action is adultery only when it adulterates a marriage. To adulterate means to corrupt, debase, or make impure by addition of a foreign or inferior substance. That is what a sexual act with a third party does to a marriage, but sexual relations between two spouses does not adulterate their marriage. The contention that the marriage of divorce persons is not really a marriage in God's sight is a groundless and hurtful assumption.

A husband and wife may divorce because of incompatibility. Later, she may have illicit sexual relations with another man. Does that give her former husband “grounds for divorce,” thus making him an innocent party to the divorce? By her action subsequent to her divorce, she sinned, but not

against her former husband. He cannot claim retroactive grounds for divorce, as some have done. If she remarries, neither does that adulterate her former marriage which no longer exists, giving her former husband grounds for divorce retroactively.

Commenting further on the state of the guilty party who has been divorced because of infidelity, Joe correctly affirms, “They aren't destined to a life of loneliness and sexual unfulfillment (which puts them in even greater endangerment of sin) because they strayed and have been divorced by their spouse.” He points to Paul's supportive declaration as he, continues, “Paul said in 1 *Corinthians* 7:27-28 that the loosed are free to marry without qualifying it in regards to why they were loosed.” Correct again. Paul advised, “Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you should marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she has not sinned” (NASV).

We miss the impact of that passage because of pre-set ideas and vague translations. The word that Paul uses is not *free*, but the Greek *luo* which Vine defines as *to loose*,

unbind, release. In order for a man to be loosed, unbound, or released from a wife, he must necessarily have been bound to one previously and then loosed by divorce or her death. Paul did not exclude the divorced person in this passage.

Is the adulteration of a marriage an unpardonable sin? If a person adulterates a marriage by sexual violation, is that person an adulterer for the rest of his or her life? No! Leaving no doubt, as Paul approaches his discourse on marriage, he declares, “Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor **adulterers**, (etc.).. will inherit the kingdom of God. And such **were** some of you. But you were **washed**, you were **sanctified**, you were **justified** ..” (1 Cor. 6:9-11). After repentance and forgiveness, a person is no longer guilty of any sin on Paul's list!

Paul did not sentence the penitent adulterer to a life of celibacy declaring, “You have made your bed; now lie in it!” like some of us have been known to do.

Neither Joe nor I have been divorced nor are we contemplating one! So we are not trying to justify ourselves by these explanations.

(For a fuller discussion, please read my FREE AS SONS, Ch. 16; *Let The Unmarried Marry.*) []

The Conditional “IF”

Continued study and reevaluation is in order lest we follow the tracks of other wanderers. All sincere searchers through the ages have found puzzling and unanswered questions in their quest to find a consistent theology. With no intention of irreverence, I have to say that I perceive no consistent interfacing of doctrines taught by the various New Covenant writers. It is I, rather than they, who is at fault, I agree.

My perceived problem stems from the topical treatment of facets of doctrine by the inspired writers. They do not always weave a whole fabric by relating all essential elements, conditions, and stipulations into one essay – such as the sovereignty of God, election, predestination, God's calling, our calling on God, accountability, justification, sanctification, activity of the Holy Spirit, security, vulnerability, grace being irresistible or conditional, faith, obedience of faith, kinds of law, definitions of response/works, imperatives, and expedients. This is no exhaustive list.

There is an allurements to that common trap. Like a hunting dog who picks up the scent of one creature, ignores all other scents, and follows the one, it is common for us to choose one Biblical topic, then by help of concordance and dictionary to sniff out every passage that we can relate to this narrowed search. We build up a scriptural case, but it may not interface with the whole body of truth. We can bark up the doctrinal tree with enough dogmatism (a puny pun!) to become exclusive and derisive of others who are barking up different trees. One illustration of this exercise will be used for this essay.

In the last third of this century a focus on the Holy Spirit has been intensified that has developed some proliferating hybrid doctrines. It revives the older concept of the sovereignty of God to the point of denying any initiative of man. In effect, it says that man cannot reach out to God but that the Spirit must first enable man to respond. In accordance with this, the Spirit gives faith and repentance to chosen individuals, thus saving (regenerating) them by that faith, and then the individual responds to the grace already extended to him. The life of the redeemed one is continually led by the Spirit without which he cannot do pleasing works of sanctification. This is

deemed to be the life filled, led, and directed by the Holy Spirit. This is sometimes relayed with condescending attitude to those who question such an all-prevailing possession of the Spirit.

In our "rediscovery of grace," the misunderstanding of "not of works" has led some to see faith itself as a gift of God rather than something we accomplish. Yet we have known of no person being *given* faith who did not first hear the gospel which *produced* the faith. The person then acted upon his faith rather than responding to his supposed salvation.

If it is all the choice of God and the work of the Spirit, then ultimate salvation is unconditional, or else the Spirit has not done his work effectively. To evade the force of examples of believers who departed from the faith or fell from grace, it has long been contended that such persons were not truly converted in the first place. But the classic example of Simon who previously practiced magic teaches otherwise (Acts 8). When the Samaritans "...believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip." Simon is presented as equally sincere as the other converts. After his sin, he was directed to repent and pray for forgiveness rather than to repent and be baptized because of the ineffectiveness of his supposedly insincere previous baptism.

Because man can do no work to add to the atonement does not mean that the effect of the atonement for sins is applied to each human being without condition. Both before and after conversion, there are conditional "IFs." We shall list a few.

John 8:31 - "Jesus then said to the Jews who had believed in him, 'if you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.'"

John 15:10 - "if you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love..."

Romans 10:9 - "... if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

2 Timothy 2:11-13 - "if we have died with him, we shall also live with him; if we endure, we shall also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful..."

1 John 1:9-10 - "if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. if we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us."

Matthew 6:14-15 - "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

Romans 8:13 - "... for if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live."

1 John 1:7 - "... if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin."

1 Timothy 2:15 - "Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty."

These are sufficient examples to rivet the point. If the condition is not met, the result will be reversed. Both the reception of saving grace and the continued sanctification it offers are conditional.

So I have used my concordance to find a list of prooftexts to support my point without harmonizing them with other texts that give assurance. Without delineating further in this essay, we will conclude by observing that we can trust happily and confidently in the promises of God being always aware that we can choose to deny the faith or to live in rebellious impenitence. []

WHAT I HEAR FROM YOU

{The names and addresses of some writers are printed here. That does not violate trust for their messages are copied from my internet Guest Book where their identity is already made public.)

➔ Just a note to let you know that I genuinely appreciate your site. I am glad that there are brethren such as you and Edward Fudge who are willing to say, "Hey, wait a minute, are we (C of Christ) sure that we are the ONLY ones with truth?" As a minister in the Christian Church (DOC) who is in the process of making a change which may well lead me into the churches of Christ, it is good to know that there are those who love grace and are committed to true unity in Christ and not simply holding the attitude of, "If you will join US there will be unity." -Signed.

➔ How do you always seem to know what I need? I get more out of your writings than I've received from the past 5 years of attending church! The last *Freedom's Ring* answered EXACTLY what I've been trying to figure out on my own, but to no avail. Thank you! -Signed.

➔ As a victim of legalism for many years, and as an elder within such a system, I am delighted to browse the articles related to this form of spiritual abuse. May the "God of all grace" bless you heaps. -Jim Peacock, Auckland, NZ.

➔ To all who have traveled the path to frustration as I have: Being added to the Lord in the year '84 was the greatest event by far of my life! Since then I've studied myself right out of the then known "Crossroads Movement," then waded through the mire of the traditional or mainstream group with all its sects, and now I sit and ponder at this site which looks to bring me back to my first love. I ask you, "Be diligent with your search for true worship. Be as the Bereans, who chose not to accept the Apostles at their word, but searched the Holy Scriptures of our Lord, our God, Christ Jesus. It has been my greatest blessing to know that man is not perfect, and because of this there has not been an Elder, nor Preacher, nor group of people able to bind their opinions upon me for very long, for it is the Lord I ultimately strive to please, not man. I thank you God for using people to help me on my path to knowing you even more. -<jburns10@webtv.net>

➔ Cecil, Keep up the good work. You keep asking the questions, brother, we'll keep shifting our paradigms. -Jim Woods, Rochester, MN

➔ What a refreshing site. -Gee Hall <ghall36557@aol.com>, Little Rock. (Within the hour, he wrote again.) When I first read a article on grace I thought this was a very refreshing site. I NO LONGER THINK SO!!!! Please continue to read and study your Bible because you have greatly strayed from the scriptures and are leading others astray.

➔ I am very disturbed by your author's LIBERAL views. I only hope and pray that you all would return to the Bible and see the Error of your teachings. May God's Truth find you Brethren before it is too late! -J.S. Seaton. <jss_ss40@hotmail.com>

→ This is still a wonderful work that is desperately needed in the Church. I believe it is working and others are opening their eyes to God's message of Grace. God bless you and your ministry. -Ken Beaty, Bella Vista, AR

→ Ever since my friend from Tennessee recommended to me to read Edward Fudge's web page, his *The Grace of God* changed my heart, forever. I learned that there are basically three kinds of preachers: legalism preachers, sin license preachers, and grace loving preachers. I used to be a legalism preacher, but now I am full of life being a grace loving preacher. So I have decided that from now on, I am going to be reading from the minds and hearts of grace loving Christians and not go back to being a slave to the minds and hearts of legalism preachers again. Praise God! So it is very exciting for me to be finding so many materials through the web of grace loving preachers / teachers. God bless you. -Rod Burk, Charleston, WV.

→ This web site is a breath of fresh air!! I especially enjoyed Norman Parks. Does he have suggestions on how to

Protestants, as some present-day historians do, that in the fragile world of the 1520s they champion social reforms on the scale of a twentieth-century egalitarian society is simply to demand that they forfeit their own vision of reform and die for the truths we hold to be self-evident. By such criticism we burden the past with our own bad conscience and blame it for failing to realize our dreams. Those lines reminded me of my tendency to wonder why "under the sun" (as my teachers in high school used to say to me) previous leaders in USA churches of Christ did not "get it" as clearly as I do in regard to God's grace etc. etc. As I read Ozment's words again I was struck by a startling reality: a year or so in the future there may be folks who wonder why I did not share the truth(s) they "hold to be self-evident." I write this to you because as I think of your writing over the years I am convinced that you had grasped this reality long before either Ozment or I saw the dawn. -(Signed by a respected writer.)

change authoritarian practices in the church? -Peter French
<plfrench@aol.com> Council Bluffs, IA.

→ Have been reading the books and articles. Reading is the next best thing to conversing about the topics. Haven't given up on CoC precisely because I run across thinkers and believers contained in these pages. Downloaded Norman Parks' essays on elders and authority as our congregation looks to appoint more. We just must keep pointing to Jesus, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, not our humanly flawed and fallen reason and logic. -David Combs
<david_combs@prodigy.net> Clearwater, FL.

→ Keep up the fantastic work for the Lord!!! -Shane Arnolds, <shane-a@mweb.co.za> Port Elizabeth, South Africa.

→ Thanks for your insightful answer. I was raised Catholic and was taught a rather neat side-step to the whole evolution question. The Catholic Church teaches that the essential point of creation is that at some point God gave man a soul, which distinguishes us from other creatures. I am far less concerned about how I got here than with where I am going to end up! I had not considered the creation story in context of a literal interpretation of the Bible. I always take the view that since there were no humans, how can we measure a day in God's reckoning? I really enjoy your newsletter and it's open spirit. I think the biggest problem in the world today is disunity in the Christian body. You keep chipping away at issues and attitudes that keep the walls up. -James.

→ Thank you for your stimulating thoughts that you share through the printed page. In our local library I came across Steven Ozment's book *Protestants: The Birth of a Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1992). The lines which caught my attention are the following: *To ask of the first*