

# FREEDOM'S RING

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

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## Millennial Musings

This is being written on January 1, 2000, that is, according to man's reckoning of time in the Western world. On any other celestial body, our measurement of duration would make no sense. There the cycles of eating, sleeping, and reproduction of earth creatures would be terribly disoriented. The rules of physics are universal but the measurement of existence is not. God probably pays no attention to our calendar though many religionists make much ado about it. The end of the 6000 years of man's reckoning has been both exciting and scary for them. Throughout life I wondered if I would live to enjoy the novelty of using the date 2000.

I formerly interpreted Peter's declarations about the dissolution of our world literally and thought that God would one day "uncreate" this universe. I now grant that the universe may be billions of years old and may still be around billions more. Our recorded history covers only a brief moment of it. I have lived one day for each 25 days since Jesus was on earth. The successive overlapping of the lives of 60 persons who lived beyond 100 years would reach back through the supposed 6000 years of Bible history. What an unfathomable universe to become annihilated after only 6000 years!

Archeologists uncover the remains of cities that flourished a few hundreds or thousands of years ago. Can we expect the evidences of our civilization to be around 10,000 years from now? Even our grave markers are not likely to survive the ravages of time, neglect, and willful destruction. Who can predict how many, if any, people will have survived new viruses, radiation, starvation, genocide, earth's depletion, etc. by then? My earthly body will still be here but not in its recognizable form. Allowing that I have eaten and drunk three pounds of earthly materials per day for my 81 years, there are about 90,000 pounds of what has been my body mingling with the other elements and in living things. We have no reason to think those elements will cease to exist. Will a bodily resurrection bring all those elements back together?

Even though we humans are blessed with intelligence to use logic and to weigh evidences, we often prefer the fanciful over reality. I began my eighty-second year last November, but I will not reach 82 until next November. That is easy to understand. Logic tells us that we began the last year of the century and millennium on January 1, 2000 but neither will be completed until the year ends. The imagination of the public has overruled logic as our celebrations last night demonstrated.

We who are otherwise intelligent people like fanciful ideas even though they may be illogical and false. We like to

believe in flying saucers and visitors from space. Trust in absolutely baseless horoscope readings and zodiac signs are so popular that they are in the daily newspaper, and I fear that it is not just the pagans who have interest in them. Intelligent people know that fortune telling, card readings, witchcraft, and supposed seances are total deceptions, but they still keep the sinister characters who traffic in them in business. Medical fads and incantations of the mystics produce imaginary cures. The fascination with the mystical and fanciful keeps the greedy individuals enriched who exploit every sort of magic medical remedy. Some prefer their magical potions and treatments over scientifically proven methods. In an age of information, a paranoid imagination leads countless people to suspect conspiracies by the scientists, medical profession, and governments who are all out to get us. They become afraid to eat, drink, or breathe. In our time of the explosion of scientific data, our belief in the mystical, imaginary, and fanciful may be little ahead of those of our less enlightened ancestors!

This human inclination of escapism from reality has led to development of superstitions and worship of pagan deities throughout man's history. The good or ill workings of nature have been attributed to those fanciful controllers. Anecdotal claims of miraculous effects, visions, apparitions, and revelations have been trusted without scientific investigation. Rituals, incantations, and mass mesmerizing manipulations reinforce the feeling of some extraordinary power or communication. Those subjective feelings then satisfy the mind that the god has responded.

True religion is deals with abstract and mystical concepts having a spiritual meaning or reality that is neither apparent to the senses nor obvious to the intelligence. Yet that does not mean that our religion is based upon intuition, insight, or similar subjective experience. True religion is based upon faith which is the acceptance of physical, historical, and Biblical evidences both internal and external that are short of literal proof. This takes it out of the realm of the fanciful, the imaginary, the anecdotal, the baseless. That faith is from a trust in the Biblical message also attested by God's working in the lives of its writers. If we trust in mystical voices, sensations, visions, apparitions, and subjectivity, we are reverting to the same supposed guidance of the pagan religions.

While it is true that there is much figurative language in the Bible, there is a great difference in Biblical interpretation and intuition, emotional feeling, or subjective experience. We have reason to suspect that many supposed communications are due to emotional disorders like paranoia. In assemblies the emotions may be exploited by mesmerizing rituals, speakers adept at stirring imaginations, exhilarating music, and even a sort of self-hypnotism.

We in our congregations have depended more on logic (though often defective) than on subjectivity, but now we are seeing some reversal of that. In our age of the greatest scholarship upholding the veracity of the Bible and interpreting its meanings, man's inclination toward the fanciful is showing itself increasingly among believers generally.

### **"God Told Me"**

This is no denial that God answers prayers and works in the lives of disciples. It is a questioning, however, that he gives special revelations verified by feelings today. If you claim such experiences, I cannot argue with you any more than I can contradict what you dreamed last night. You become the only authority of the subjective. When persons say that God revealed something to them or that the Spirit put something on their hearts to share with you, they, perhaps unintentionally, are endeavoring to make their message authoritative. If God told them to share it, it becomes as authoritative as any New Testament epistle. And I have heard such expressed "revelations" which plainly contradicted the Scriptures.

You are not the only one who depends upon such questionable guidance. In the early centuries, the Catholic religion claimed special guidance – even both branches as they divided into the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. The evangelicals and fundamentalists have been assured of their special guidance as they further fragmented. The Mormons claim authenticity through revelations to Joseph Smith and continued guidance of their apostles. Then there are the more extreme cults like the Branch Davidians who followed supposed revelations. And what of all those who have been claiming special insights concerning "end-time prophecies" who are proven wrong by time? If you want to believe such questionable guidance, that is your prerogative, but count me out.

Does this become a wee bit confusing? Has the Spirit been directing each of them? Is there anyone who thinks all these conflicting groups were produced by the direction of the Spirit? Does God reveal to different ones of them that they are the exclusive, true church, as differing ones claim? You may respond that your group has persons with the gift of discernment who verify your claims. But other differing groups make the same claim. From whence is this confusion, disarray, and conflict? "For God is not a God of confusion but of peace" (1 Cor. 14:33). Paul urges that we be "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). Don't attribute it to the Spirit, but more like the late Flip Wilson, confess, "The devil made me do it!"

If we are to establish a relationship with God in Christ and maintain that unity with him and all others who are in him, it must be based on more solid evidence than subjective feelings and mystical experiences. The Text is still our trustworthy guide. At best, Biblical interpretation is an inexact science, but at least the Scriptures are the common source of direction. Our fascination for the subjective and emotional experience must not be allowed to over-ride their authority.

In the new century and millennium, with our advanced scholarship in everything relating to the Christian religion, there is optimism that our baseless differences and the walls of separation they create will dissolve. []

## **Patriarchs: Past and Present**

The family has always been the basic element of organized society. In ancient times those families became extended forming tribes which included the male descendants.

Generally, we have come to refer to the founder or inherited leader of such a family in early Biblical history as a patriarch.

The designation "patriarch," however, is used only in New Covenant writings. It is applied to Abraham (Heb. 7:4), to the sons of Jacob (Acts 7:8-9), and to David (Acts 2:29). The term seems to be equivalent to the head of the father's house, or of a tribe (1 Chron. 24:31; 27:32; 2 Chron. 25:12). It is common today to speak of those in the genealogies preceding the era of Moses as patriarchs.

Although patriarch is formed of the two words *father* and *ruler*, in its common usage it meant *head of a father's house, father of a tribe*, and more especially *head of a family*. It was a practical, inherited capacity of leadership and respect rather than an elected, authoritarian office of a ruler.

Beginning with Exodus 3:16, the term elder (old, aged, bearded) is the term consistently applied to such a family/tribal leader. This usage prevails throughout the rest of the Scriptures through Revelation.

Elders are mentioned in numerous Old Testament passages, and in the Gospels they are mentioned frequently. Actually, no definition of their identity or capacity is explained in the Bible. We may rightly assume that the original patriarchal concept still prevailed in the Gospels. In the Scriptures we see them as respected heads of extended families, not elected or given legislative authority. They were influential due to their wisdom in nurturing moral and ethical families and successful business operations. Due to their stability and trustworthiness they represented their clans' best interests in community life. They communicated with other leaders and men of religion and taught their tribes the matters of common interest in maintaining a cohesive society. In the Gospels particularly they were protectors of tradition and the status quo.

Families lived in proximity in their inherited home-places for generations allowing them to increase into tribes or clans. These extended families even included the slaves, servants, and employees. The house, or household, of a man included his entire family and business operation. A man who ruled his house well was a successful business man also.

Then, in Acts we read of elders (4:5, 8, 23; 6:12) with no indication that they were different from the traditional elder of the Old Testament and Gospels. Still, with no distinguishing explanation, in Acts 11:30 mention is made of elders in the Jerusalem congregation. Shall we hastily jump to the conclusion that these were selected and elected to serve as leaders or rulers among the disciples? Or rather, may we not rightly assume that they were traditional elders (heads of households, patriarchs) who had accepted Christ and were respected as leaders in their new role by the disciples?

Something different comes to view in Acts 14:23. The two evangelists, Paul and Barnabas, appointed elders in congregations of the converts they made in Asia Minor. Why was this new selection process introduced? Were they a different sort of men filling a different kind of capacity?

No explanation for this new method is made in the narrative, yet some difference in circumstances is readily recognized. They were among Gentiles whose culture was different. No doubt, some Jews were among them, but living apart from their Jewish families and tribes in Palestine, there were no prominent heads of families like those in their former homeland. So men who possessed the leadership, faith, and character of Jewish elders were sought out and appointed to give care to the congregations and to work in their best interest.

Later Titus (a Greek) was in Crete and Timothy (of Greek and Jewish parentage) was in Ephesus among Gentiles who, like them, were reared outside of the Jewish culture. Paul saw the need to reaffirm to both evangelists the qualities of the traditional patriarchal elder as they sought out men of faith, leadership, and respect to nurture the new churches. Those descriptions which we have characterized as qualifications were general and somewhat relative. They are not checklists of lawful requirements as we have been inclined to make them, or the lists would have been identical. If Titus in Crete and Timothy in Ephesus immediately appointed men matching the description Paul sent each, the men selected would have not been identical in "qualifications." For instance, Paul did not instruct Timothy to appoint men with believing children (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). Check it out for yourself.

The congregation became the family or tribe in which the elder became a patriarch or family head. In Old Testament practice, a family had only one head. Although we have contended confidently that there must be a plurality of elders in a congregation, the language in the New Testament writings does not make that a clear demand. (More about that in *Free In Christ*, Ch. 23: "Flexibility in Organization.")

How does this all fit in modern American culture? Perhaps the Indian chief or the Southern gentleman of the plantation in earlier times was of closest identity with the patriarchal head of the family or tribe. But now we are a transient society with few traces of the extended family in communities today. So we must prayerfully discern who has proven his spirituality, leadership, and respect within the group. Ideally all persons should demonstrate those characteristics, but practically they do not. The selection and appointment gives congregational endorsement of those specific persons.

To the Corinthian disciples Paul wrote, "Now, brethren, you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints; I urge you to be subject to such men and to every fellow worker and laborer" (1 Cor. 16: 15-16). What a marvelous precedent! Here is the kind of proven leadership and earned respect of a patriarch / head of family / elder, and here is the cohesive, submissive service of all with no thought of rank or authority. Such interaction works wonderfully among people of good will, but where there is strife and pride, not even an authoritative system will work. We need no prooftexts to substantiate that for we have proved it repeatedly by our actions.

The recognition of those who have already proven themselves does not establish a hierarchy of rank and authority. "Not so with you," Jesus declared concerning rulers among them (Luke 22:24-27). The only "authority" any one has over the congregation is that which the congregation grants persons, whether they be elders or anyone else. For example, a woman may be authorized by the group to publish a bulletin or a man may be authorized to build new classrooms. They may be "deputized" by the elders to do those things only if the congregation has given the elders permission to deputize them.

Although all present-day cultures have not recognized it yet, Jesus broke down the wall of separation between male and female. Women who have proven spirituality, leadership, and abilities in the congregations may well be looked upon as matriarchs. Many congregations have been started by women. Their steadying leadership and influence have helped to develop and maintain those congregations. We have not recognized them as matriarchs / elders / family heads in the church even though they have served in those capacities "unofficially" all along. These Priscillas and Phoebes have not served for recognition any more than men have, but they also should receive due recognition for their honorable leadership.

Throughout history God has used these elders (patriarchs, heads of families and tribes) to influence the basic segment of organized society. Due to the weakness of man, this arrangement has not always kept his people on the right path. But he still calls upon this wisest and most influential type of persons to work for the best interest of his people collectively. And he calls upon us to recognize such persons as our leaders.

## HOOK'S POINTS

➔ Yes, in our search for truth we swing with the pendulum from one extreme to the other, but if you are perfectly balanced in the middle, beware! Your clock has stopped! And you have stopped at the lowest point! ☹

➔ Your holiday remembrances added much cheer for Lea and me. Thank you! Lea can no longer act as our social secretary. My lack of response to you comes under the heading of "the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." It is increasingly difficult for me to keep up.

➔ Exciting India Update. There are two great developments regarding Dr. Prasad's work in India. First, he is to be blessed with a means of transportation. **Jim and Myrtle Clark** of New Braunfels, Texas are buying a motor scooter for his use. This motor bike will greatly enable his travel among the remote villages for his effective sessions of evangelism and for distributing *Free In Christ*. I am truly thankful for their concern and generosity.

There will be additional operational expense, especially for gasoline. If you would like to have a special part in this rewarding effort, call Myrtle at 1-830-625-7177, or write Jim and Myrtle Clark, 1204 Hollyhock, New Braunfels, TX 78130.

Last year 1,000 copies of *Free In Christ* in the Telugu language were printed for \$1,700.00. The supply was about depleted, so I sent another \$1,700.00 for a reprint. Due to setup already having been made on the first printing, 2,000 copies will be made for that price! With Dr. Prasad's zeal, that supply will not last long! He is a tireless worker converting many. He often sends pictures of groups baptized and of preachers, students, and others receiving copies of the book. In enabling him we have a most effective and economical way to reach the lost and to confirm the disciples.

➔ In 1999, 1,500 copies of *Free In Christ* were distributed free of charge, not through my goodness but the generosity of you who continue to enable this ministry through your donations. As we enter 2000, there is \$3,462.79 in our work fund. Thank you! Since late 1984, in addition to the books sold, we have been able to distribute over 31,000 copies free of charge along with a much lesser number of my other books. Most of the books are delivered through the mail. In my packaging them, I have used thousands of bubble-lined mailers, hundreds of cardboard boxes, and for in-between sized packages, more than a mile of wrapping paper. It is a joy to be used in such a worldwide outreach..

With all my books being accessible at my web site, we have no estimation as to how many use that medium operated by Vic Phares out of Shreveport.

## Those Classified Ads

It is always a traumatic experience for a preacher when the congregation "suggests" that he should seek another setting for his work. Well, they fire him! Rather euphemistically nowadays we might say the Spirit is directing him to another field of labor. But since the Spirit is secretive about the field, the preacher must search to find it.

Back in my ancient times, we depended mainly upon the grapevine to learn of congregations that had dispatched their minister where we might apply. If a group was desperate enough to run an ad in the *Firm Foundation*, only a desperate preacher would check it out. Now there are want-ads in the journals, bulletins, and web sites. As I scan those classified ads today in a candid manner, my reactions run from appreciation through amusement, amazement, and concern. Let's review a sort of composite of them.

Paul wrote, "And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, etc." (Eph. 4:11-12). That did not offer many capacities for work in those times, and some of those have been deleted! ☺

Here is a much wider list collected from the Classified Ads: preacher, gospel preacher, minister, co-minister, pulpit minister, associate minister, involvement minister, associate involvement minister, discipleship minister, evangelist, evangelist / preacher, missionary, evangelist/missionary, youth minister, pulpit/youth minister, associate youth minister, youth/family minister, youth minister/song leader, children's ministry director, education minister, church builder. No call for secretaries or janitors, however. Nor for pastors / shepherds / elders.

We applaud the intention of evangelizing and pastoral teaching in each of these modern, narrowly defined capacities. They are specialized methods and means of doing the work Paul speaks of more generally in the church at large. Discovery of aptitudes and sharpening of skills for efficiency are wise and practical.

Of concern, however, is the fact that most of our people do not know the difference between a preacher and a teacher or between a teacher and a pastor or between a minister and an evangelist. In scriptural context, the gospel was preached – heralded, proclaimed, evangelized – while the general doctrines were imparted by teaching, instruction, reproof, rebuke, and exhortation. The gospel message was conveyed through evangelists (preachers) but prophets, pastors, and teachers edified through teaching.

Any person who serves in an appointed capacity in a church is a minister. The Greek term *diakonos* which is Anglicized into *deacon* is also the word translated into *servant* and *minister*. They have the same meaning. All disciples are deacons-ministers-servants of God, but only those appointed or hired by a church serve in that capacity in the congregation.

There is no scriptural command or precedent for preaching to an assembly of disciples. They have already become evangelized, obedient believers who subsequently need the guidance of the apostolic teachings and pastoral care. The difference is like that of a recruiting officer and a drill sergeant. Once recruited, they need no recruiting again, but they need the teaching and training of the sergeant. The assembly is the place for teaching and training rather than recruitment. The primary purpose of assemblies is edification of disciples rather than evangelism or corporate worship, as Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 14.

By a slow evolutionary process we have been developing a distinctive *clergy* system. Carl Ketcherside, in an article, *The Clergy System*, wrote, "Perhaps, there is nothing seriously wrong with the mere words *clergy* and *laity*. It is the creating of a distinction between them which is so fraught with danger. The fact is that all of God's clergy are laity, and all of God's laity are clergy. Every child of God is a priest. Every child

of God is a minister. Every disciple of Jesus has entered the ministry. The word of God knows nothing of a disciple who is not a minister. So long as we pay empty lip-service to this concept while practicing something which is exactly the opposite, we are hypocritical and acting out of sham."

The importation of specialized professionals speaks loudly that the community of believers is not self-sustaining, that disciples cannot communicate effectively with their peers, and that highly skilled personnel are needed. Commonly, the congregation in existence for a generation or two or three still depends upon hired servants recruited as surrogate elders.

With all good intentions, we have transformed the local body, a priesthood of all believers, into a system of organized religion through which each is obliged to render his or her service to God. Then individual initiative and aptitudes are stifled by the expectation of professionals doing the work one is qualified to do. One may easily relax into being a spectator or a small cog in the machinery of the organized system. Most of the effort, personnel, and finances go to operate the system. It may be compared to a 150-pound person driving a two-ton automobile; most of the power is spent in moving the vehicle rather than the individual.

There is a growing realization among us that God endows us for private ministries. Whatever a person can do best and enjoy doing most is a gift that can be utilized as a person's life-ministry apart from dependence upon direction, approval, or cooperation of anyone else. Paul's tent-making evangelism gave him greatest satisfaction and freedom (1 Cor. 9). Was it unwise for the great apostle to use his precious time making tents when he should have been "serving the Lord"? I can appreciate persons who want to serve "full-time," but are we not all serving "full-time"? No vacation from serving!

This house in which I live is in a neighborhood with beautiful professional landscaping and yard care. While there may be some recognition of the skills of the keepers, they do not receive credit for the beauty of the neighborhood. They just do what they are paid to do as a profession. The homeowners who hire them are due more credit than they are. Can you not relate this to our subject?

The youngest acceptable age that I saw in the ads was 24 years and the oldest was 50. There is little demand for men past 50 years of age, though some who were engaged to work while younger are used as they grow past that age, and some churches accept older men because of scarcity of younger ones. And some are cheaper. So there is a career span of about 25 years.

Many churches require academic training of a college degree, advanced degree, bachelor in Bible, and/or computer skills, with from three to five years experience. If we are to continue to depend upon the pulpit, I am certainly in favor of seeing intelligent life there. I am not convinced, however, that those of highest academic training communicate best with the masses we hope to reach. Without intention we may proclaim an unspoken message that the scriptures relating to a life of discipleship are so complicated that only the men from the ivory towers can explain them. The message comes across that men, women, and youth of the congregation lack capability to reach, teach, lead, and upbuild their peers, but a sort of professional priestly class is needed.

Our Stone-Campbell Movement swept the nation in the 1800's depending mostly upon tent-making evangelists and ministers. I once read (but lost the reference) one brother's claim that, when he moved to Dallas about the turn of the century, there was no other "full-time preacher" between

Memphis and Dallas. In my limited experience, I never knew of a church having an office and secretary until the 1940's.

As for the experience of the applicant, how will he gain experience if he must have it before being accepted?

Some ads mention need of positive spiritual qualities, zeal, and initiative. Marriage to a supportive wife, and even children, are called for. Some require excellent speaking ability, good communication skills, willingness to work under oversight of elders, and willingness to minister to the church. A four-talent man is sought by one congregation to do preaching, teaching, visiting, and some administrative duties.

In most congregations are there not men and women who have these individual skills, interests, and aptitudes plus a willingness to exercise them at no charge? Why should we demand that all these aptitudes be in one imported person when they exist already in the body ready to be tapped at no financial expenditure?

The term *hire* is used unashamedly. One group will hire for 20 hours per week but others specify full-time expectations. *Hire and fire!* -- such crass, atrocious terms! Do we hire men to perform spiritual service? If they can be hired with production specifications like those of carpenters or salesmen, then they can be fired for lack of achievement. The congregation becomes like a business dealing in a spiritual commodity.

Paul instructed, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching; for the scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain,' and, 'The laborer deserves his wages.'" (1 Tim. 5:17-19; see Gal. 6:6). This is the only precedent for financial support of a person ministering within the congregation except possibly for that of widows (5:9f). As for evangelists, however, Paul opens this avenue of support (1 Cor. 9).

Here is an elder who is devoting himself so fully to preaching to the lost and teaching the church that his occupational job suffers; so the church supports him financially that he may expand his efforts. Doesn't the church *hire* him, you may ask. No, he is not preaching and teaching as a professional occupation in order to make a living. He is doing those things out of zealous concern and then becomes enabled more fully by support of others. That is a difference between a servant and a hireling.

Most of the ads reveal the size of the church and some state positive purposes and goals for the group like being purpose driven, reaching the community, and increase of the numbers. One describes itself as a conservative congregation and another as being very doctrinal and studying from the King James Version. None mention desire for re-study of traditional beliefs and practices or outreach toward other groups for unity.

And some red flags are prominent by demand that the applicant be "scripturally sound," "doctrinally sound," "sound in the word," "firmly rooted in the word," or "well versed in the scriptures." I will let you choose your own adjective to apply to that! Can't you just imagine some preacher who is eager to relocate reading such advertisements and saying to himself, "No use for me to apply, for I am not doctrinally sound, etc.?"

What is being communicated by those expressions? They are red flags saying, "We want a man who will reinforce our traditional teachings and practices (for whichever splinter group it is) without challenging anything that would rock the boat. Doctrinal soundness is agreement with us. Let the applicant take note."

Am I just being picky like the grouchy old man I am? Or do these advertisements reveal a misdirection into a fully developed concept of modern organized religion? When teaching that each person is a working part of the **body**, we tend to interpret **body** to mean **congregation**. While it is true that one may rightly serve in capacities in a congregation, our primary responsibility for use of gifts is in daily life, in personal relationships, and in private ministry. Organizations do not have religion. That's an individual matter.

In his parable of the judgment Jesus did **not** say, "Truly, I say to you, as your **congregation** did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Matt. 25:31-46). The *Good Samaritan* used his time, money, and energy to show compassion rather than referring the victim to an organized program. A floating bulletin clipping lists "*Two Dozen Things You Can Do For The Church.*" Most suggested activities involve serving individuals, like "Take a remembrance to a shut-in." A loving gesture, but for whom? For the shut-in or a system of religion? Serving individuals or an organization? Are we an organization serving or individuals ministering? A lectureship is announced with "Serving The Church" as its theme. It is granted that there are needs too big for an individual to fill without cooperation with others, but we are warning of an unhealthy trend.

Though I feel strongly that reform is in order, I am not indicating that correctness in the operational activities of the local body is essential to salvation. Many methods for expediting God's will in a group are left to human wisdom as to what is the most effective and appropriate. Methods are matters of expediency. No man or group has unerring wisdom.

The more we deviate from principles set forth in the scriptures, however, the less effective and more problematical we can expect our activities to become. []

## Vocabulary Adaptations

If I were the creator of a comic strip, I think I would have fun with words. Picture the man, while reading to his wife about a *terrific* tornado, glancing up at her, and blurring out, "Hey, you look *terrific* in your new dress!" Or, "I am *nauseated*. I am offended that you consider me to be *nauseous*!" And *Gay* is not the most popular name for little girls now.

Words are tricky, adapting new meanings like a chameleon changing colors. Many are commonly misused. If we give a modern or adapted meaning to a word in the Scriptures, we will misunderstand the message. For that reason, it is good that we use modern language translations and make use of dictionaries of Bible words.

Here, in topical manner, we will review a potpourri of commonly used words and terms whose meanings we have distorted. While the use of many of them may not be a trap-door to hell, I think you will agree that we express misunderstandings that develop into misleading trends. So, let's look at a few of them.

In a pitch to gain subscriptions, one journal claims to cover "the continuing story of our **entire brotherhood**." Such a use of the term *brotherhood* is so common among us that readers who are of the Churches of Christ may detect nothing amiss with the expression. We understand that it is meant to include only those in our congregations. The journal does not cover the continuing story of those in the Christian Church, Assembly of God, Baptist Church, or any other group. The implication is clear that persons in groups other than the Church of Christ are not brothers in Christ. That use of the term is an effort in a less glaring manner to reinforce the concept that we

are the only brothers in Christ. Whether we declare that everybody else is going to hell or just imply that we are the entire brotherhood, the abhorrent, sectarian message is the same. When Peter exhorted disciples to "Love the brotherhood," (1 Peter 2:17), he did not imply that they were all in a separated group with a distinguishing name.

A similar term is **our fellowship**. Fellowship is a state created by God. "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor. 1:9). It is not something we do or extend primarily. All who are in fellowship with God are in fellowship with one another. We cannot withdraw the fellowship of another person from God, so if we can withdraw fellowship, we are necessarily withdrawing from God who is the center and creator of fellowship. When we speak of *our fellowship*, it is commonly understood to mean those in the Church of Christ who are not in a state of brotherhood with others. It is judgmental, exclusive, and misconceived.

Many have been rejected in our congregations being accused of **walking disorderly**. That may mean that they were judged guilty of inconsistent attendance to assemblies, teaching some variation from the unwritten creed of the group, accepting others across party lines, or anything else the group might oppose. The "adjustable wrench" to manipulate this is 2 Thessalonians 3:14, (context 3:6-15) in older versions of the Scriptures. Newer versions indicate clearly that Paul was telling them to refuse to be *enablers* to the *freeloaders* taking advantage of their benevolence. It is hard to read *withdrawal of fellowship* for any reason into that passage. Let us learn to be honest and just even with the reprehensible characters who may be among us.

"Are you a **member of the church?**" you may ask me. My answer: no, not really! We who "speak where the Bible speaks" may be surprised to learn that the Scriptures do not speak of *members of the church*, a term commonly used among us. Why not? The church is not an entity in which we seek membership but it is a spiritual state of justification. The church is the *ekklesia*, those "called out" into salvation thus comprising God's saved assembly or congregation. Salvation is not found in joining an organization or becoming a part of one. Salvation is a state of justification rather than membership in a group. We are *the saved*, and the saved do not have members. The church is the sum of those added by the Lord through his saving them (Acts 2:36-47).

It is true that we are described as members of the one body (1 Cor. 12:12-31). In speaking of the interdependent working relationship of disciples, they are depicted figuratively as a body, and this figure applies to the universal congregation rather than a local one.

We speak of **placing membership**. That is a no-brainer term we invented to substitute for **joining the church**. Having made our congregations into organized systems, we do join them, for a person can be a member of an organization.

In the above, I have used the word **church** as it is commonly used both in versions of the Bible and our vocabulary. However, the word *church* should not even be in our Scriptures! The word *ekklesia*, meaning "called out" into an assembly or congregation, is grossly rendered "church" in the translations. I say *rendered* for it is not a *translation* of the word. The Greek word *kuriakos* from which *church* is derived is not even used in the New Testament Scriptures in relation to God's people. So when we speak of **church members**, we are doubly misguided!

With that in mind, think of what misconceptions are expressed by such terms as a *Church of Christ member*, *Church of Christ school*, *Church of Christ publication*, *Church of Christ wedding*, etc. How ill-conceived and sectarian is such a statement as "I am Church of Christ!"

What of our claim that *Church of Christ* is the Scriptural name for us as a group? The Scriptures give no proper name for us to wear corporately. If one is appropriate to wear, it could not derive from *kuriakos* but from *ekklesia* for reasons stated above.

Some congregations advertise that they are a **Bible Believing Church**. Now ain't that nice! Have you ever known of a Christian group that does not believe the Bible?

Another claims to be a **New Testament church**. If that means to be a group who has accepted and lives in accordance to the new covenant of grace, that is fine, though other churches make that claim also. But if that is a claim that the saved assembly of God was produced by the New Testament Scriptures, that is off base. Through the gospel God initiated his saved congregation in Christ a full generation before any portion of the New Testament Scriptures were written and several generations before the canon was compiled.

For many years I taught that we are a **restoration of the New Testament church**. I had been taught that the congregation of God had fallen away totally, ceasing to exist, and was restored in our Movement at some indefinite point in the 1800's. In spite of my restoration indoctrination I should have had enough insight to realize that we at no time had a King with no kingdom, a Head without a body, or a Savior with none saved. A total defeat for centuries until the Stone-Campbell Movement in America!

The pioneers of our movement set about to **reform** the existing community of disciples rather than to **restore** a non-existent one. Their efforts of **restoration** were like those of Paul who wrote epistles intended to correct flaws and misdirection among existing disciples.

The epistles do not use the terms **one, true church** or **a loyal church**. Those are terms used by partisans today to communicate to their own sectarian group the state of their exclusiveness.

We deplore the **divided church**. Yet, the one body cannot be divided so that there are two, or even fractions of one. "There is one body" (Eph. 4:4) – not "should be one body." Jesus prayed that we might all be one, and his prayer was fulfilled, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body..." (1 Cor. 12:12). We may fight and separate from each other in local groups, but we are all still in the one body, just as siblings may fight and reject each other while still in their father's family. Only the father can disinherit, and he refuses our judgment as a basis for that.

Many times we have heard someone relate how that a certain person served in a certain group for many years before being **converted to the church**, meaning the Church of Christ, of course. The big question is whether the person was converted to Christ or to a group. Had he not accepted Christ many years previous to his change of groups? We older ones are familiar with those sermons, tracts, and books explaining, "Why I Am A Member of the Church of Christ" by which we hoped to convert people from other churches to ours. Too much of what we have called evangelism has not been to bring people to Christ but to bring them to our own splinter group of the Churches of Christ. Yes, we have converted many of them to the church instead of the savior!

Then we dolefully relate that some brother has **quit the church** rather than saying he turned away from serving God. The unfaithful disciple often has been said to be **out of duty** because he no longer “goes to church” or does “church work.” Nowadays, the absentee from assemblies is said to be **out of the will of God** – whatever that means.

“You must **give sacrificially**,” the brother urges in his effort to boost the contributions to the budgeted program of the congregation. In fact, he may lay a little guilt on you so you will **really sacrifice**. After all, it is God’s work, and this is your way to **give to the Lord**. Don’t rob God of tithes and offerings! The **portion you return to the Lord** must be generous. If you give out of abundance, or if it costs you nothing, you are not sacrificing.

What a misleading vocabulary we have developed in promoting our projects! Although Paul does use the term *giving* in regard to the one-time collection for the poor in Jerusalem and support for his evangelism sent from Philippi, that term is never used in regard to a budget, a treasury, or a sustained program of a congregation. The generous sharing in the Jerusalem congregation was to care for the needs of the poor. In spite of that, our whole concept nowadays is that all *giving* is money given to the treasury of the church. The non-scriptural treasury is supposed to be the **Lord’s money** to be distinguished from your personal bank account which is your money. That compartmentalizes religion with a portion dedicated to God and the remainder dedicated to self.

Let’s review some basics here. Paul commended the Macedonians for giving money beyond their means into the collection for the poor disciples in Judea. The key: *they first gave themselves*. When we give ourselves to the Lord, it means just that. We are *set apart for the Lord* -- sanctified, holy, dedicated, consecrated, saints. Not partly. Without this holiness, no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14). Peter emphasizes this saintliness in us, exhorting, “...as he who called you is holy, *be holy yourselves in all your conduct*, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Peter 1:15f). In dedicating ourselves to God we offer our whole being to him as a sacrifice. The word *sacrifice* means *to offer, to make an offering*. The concept of pain, self-privation, or impoverishment is not in the word! Any offering, whether it be a song, a prayer, a fortune, a dollar, or a cup of cold water is a sacrifice.

It is not too surprising that the erroneous concept of meritorious suffering has been attached to the term *sacrifice* describing our service. But we offer sheaves, not lambs. Man cannot offer sacrifices of merit or atonement; he can only bring offerings of praise and thanksgiving.

Now let us look at Romans 12:1-2 again: “I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a *living sacrifice, holy* and acceptable to God, which is *your spiritual worship*.” What part of us is left out? All that we are, all that we have, all that we can do, all that we can become is a living offering to God – dedicated, sanctified, holy.

If we begin to think of “portions” being “returned to the Lord” in the Sunday morning collection, we have missed the whole concept. *Giving to the Lord becomes living for the Lord, and living for the Lord becomes giving to the Lord*. It is whole-life giving, sacrifice, and worship. That includes all that we do as his indwelt temples.

Working at your job, paying your rent, buying your son a bicycle, teaching your son, giving food to hungry people, encouraging the depressed person, caring for your own emotional needs, going to school, singing both spiritual and secular songs, and giving to aid evangelism are all

manifestations of the living sacrifice which is your whole-life spiritual service. Passing up opportunities to relieve human needs in order to be able to *give* into the church treasury misses the true meaning of giving (Read Mark 7:9-13). All that is encompassed in *Christian living is Christian sacrifice*. Love, however, rather than selfishness, is the motivation for Christian living.

In what we hope is corrective direction in this writing, we are not denying that one may rightly give to the support of an organized group, impersonal as it may be. In entrusting us as stewards of his endowments, God leaves it to our own loving discernment as to how best to apportion what he has put in our hands and within our power.

“Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God” (Heb. 12:15-16).

We all know that to be **saved** and to be in the state of **salvation** means to be delivered from sin and its consequences. This is the meaning in Matthew 1:21, Mark 16:15-16, and many other references. But that is not always the meaning! The word also is used many times to mean one is preserved from danger. Noah was saved from drowning in the ark (1 Peter 3:21; 2 Peter 2:5). Peter, when sinking called out for Jesus to save him from drowning (Matt. 14:30). There was an impending judgment on the Jewish nation that Jesus wished to save his disciples from which is the context of Matthew 10:22; 24:13. In this context in (Matt. 24:22) of the destruction of Jerusalem, Jesus added, “And if those days had not been shortened, no human being would be saved.” With this same meaning in his sermon on Pentecost, Peter exhorted them, “Save yourselves from this crooked (corrupt NIV) generation.” With that destructive day drawing near, Paul assures, “For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed” (Rom. 13:11) The meaning of many other passages is missed if we limit the meaning of *saved* to deliverance from sin.

We have had it impressed upon us that no man can be **righteous** except by imputation of the righteousness of Christ, crediting man’s faith for righteousness. It is true that no person can be righteous enough or do right works sufficient to merit salvation, but that does not mean that a person cannot conduct himself uprightly and that he receives no favor from God for his righteousness.

Jesus spoke of “all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah” (Matt. 23:35). It is recorded that “Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. ... Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation; Noah walked with God” (Gen. 6:7-8; 7:1). “Enoch walked with God” (Gen. 5:24) which evidently put him in Noah’s category of righteous men. Peter emphasizes the Lot was a righteous man (2 Peter 2:7-9). There are many other applicable references.

If those persons were only accounted righteous, why would it not say that? If they were accounted righteous because of their faith, then what was new about Abraham’s justification? If they were accounted as justified before Christ’s atonement, with whose righteousness were they credited, and why would Christ’s death be necessary?

Can man be righteous (just) enough to gain God’s attention and favor? Yes. Noah did (Gen. 6:7-8). Hear Paul concerning Gentiles: “For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even

though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus" (Rom. 2:13-16). James also assures us, "The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects" (James 5:16).

From all of this, we conclude that, even though man can do no works of righteousness meriting salvation, his righteous life can gain attention and favor of God.

This has grown too long; yet there are many other examples illustrating how easily we develop inaccurate meanings in our vocabulary causing us to misunderstand certain texts. In a living language words tend to adapt to current thinking. A man's hair grows so slowly the difference may not be evident each day, but if allowed to go unclipped, it changes his entire facial features. So it is with the gradual change in meaning of words. If we let them go unnoticed, the entire meaning can change. []

## What I Hear From You

(In November I responded to a letter from Bryan. In my confusion I hit the wrong keys and sent the response to every email subscriber! Then I lost Bryan's address and am not sure he ever got the message. Bryan – whoever and wherever you are – I hope you see this!)

➔ I read your letter to Bryan about using gifts outside the church structure. I taught a class on our Restoration Movement and used a quote from Carroll Osburn's lecture *Does Our Religious Past Have A Future?* That we have developed a "clergy/laity" system that allows us to enjoy the comforts of the middle class and write our check out for all the work to be done (paraphrasing here). Ministers are leaving the pulpit faster than we can fill the ones vacated by those leaving --- "let the preacher and/or the elders do it."

My conclusion to the members of the class is that the church needs to restore the concept of the "priesthood of every believer." I went on to say that when Jesus died, the veil in the Temple was torn from top to bottom making Jesus our high priest with no one in between. We, and I include elders and members alike, are trying to stitch that veil back together. I've discovered that I have a lot to restore within myself, taking responsibility for my own priesthood, and as you said, not having to work within the system to utilize my gifts – the better work probably can be done outside the system. -Chris Lynn, Alpharetta, GA <chris@cllynn.com>.

➔ I appreciate your work and spirit. I have known of your writings now for some time, and just wanted to drop you a brief note of thanks. Your faithfulness and devotion in Christian freedom has helped so many. By combining insight with simplicity, your books have helped many who may have been blown away by some more "highbrow" approach to concepts which you seem able to express so that the average person can grasp their meaning and importance. Just wanted to say "Hi," and "thanks." -Greg Hines, <greg4231@hotmail.com>.

➔ This is the first time I have communicated with you by email. I have read your first book and have been on your mailing list for *Freedom's Ring* since you started producing it. While I am not a member of the COC, so many of the topics you mention in your newsletters including ritualism are also present in other denominations as well. Your insights are refreshing, concise and Biblical. Keep up the good work. -Arlington, TX.

➔ I appreciate all the work you have done to compose such fine books, and your web site as well. May all the glory be to God. I spend countless amounts of time on your message board. It's nice to make a statement and no one discredits it from the beginning because of age (that's rare for a 22 yr. old). My mom first introduced me to *Free In Christ* about a year and a half ago. I have grown a lot since then and I think one of the things that helped me break the code of silence in the Lord's church was your books. I have since slipped a copy of *Free In Christ* into one of our elders' briefcase. He still has a pulse. Thank you for your diligent work and inspired/inspiring writing. - Steve.

➔ I just finished reading *The Death of the Custodian*. What a great book! Every Christian should read it. How sad that we who pride ourselves on "speaking where the Bible speaks" have misconstrued the new covenant. Check out our homepage <plaintalk.homepage.com>. Prescott, AZ.

