

FREEDOM'S RING

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

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Last Printed Freedom's Ring; Only Email Now

Just about the time I learned how to format it myself, I am discontinuing the printed edition! About two-thirds of you already receive *Freedom's Ring* by email; so this will not affect you. It is my hope that the rest of you loyal readers will be able to switch to email. If you do not have a computer, ask a friend who has one to receive it for you. Can you do that? I don't want to leave any of you behind, especially you who have supported and encouraged this work financially.

It has been a difficult decision for me to make, but I must face my limitations and cut back on some aspects of my work. Several years ago I began to send out reports to those who gave money to cover our expenses. After we moved to Oregon, I enlarged it, called it *Hook's Points*, and started sending it to any who wished to receive it in February 1995. Encouraged by your response, I enlarged it and gave it a less ego-centric name, *Freedom's Ring*. Later, Vic Pharis started our web site and began the email edition.

Though I have never met most of you, I have felt a strong bond as we shared thoughts and feelings, and we hope that will continue. You have added a thrilling dimension to our lives by your kindness and gracious encouragement for Lea and me. As I prepared each mailing, affixing address labels, my feelings reached out to you as I saw your names again. Many are old friends; some are newer. I felt the urge to write a personal note to each of you but time would not permit it. Regrettably, the email list will be less personal for I will not see it.

Do not send your email subscription to me. Because it is done automatically, I cannot put you on the list. You simply address: <freedomring-subscribe@egroups.com> and Send. That should put you on the list and send you a confirmation of it. To be removed send <freedomring-unsubscribe@egroups.com>. The email segments will be sent weekly or "whenever".

"Man works from sun till sun, but woman's work is never done," is a proverbial lament of the housewife. I agree! Lea has always enjoyed being a "keeper at home." Now that she is unable to do any of her former household chores and I am "chief cook and bottle washer" around here, I appreciate much more the unending tasks that she met daily.

The priority of my "ministry" now is caring for her. I am thankful that I am still physically strong enough to help her.

That necessarily shifts other things to a lesser importance. So I am appealing again for your patience and consideration.

You are kind to send me all sorts of books, tracts, and writings, but it stacks up. Much of it I will never have time to read. Sorry about that. Please do not ask for information that calls for research or study. I have neither the time nor mental energy to handle those things. With me it is not a lack of interest for "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

Your personal contacts are a sort of life-source for Lea and me. We thank God for sending you into our lives. Please do not withdraw from us. We eagerly await your personal mail, calls, and visits, but I am inundated by forwarded email, email attachments, essays, and books and tapes that you as dear friends want to send. I am honored unduly by your trust that I may help with problematic questions. My answers to many questions that are asked may be found by running a Search through my material on my web site. The Links at my site add extended resource material.

If I fail to fill your order for books properly, by all means, call it to my attention, for I have distractions and confusion. (Nothing new there!) I hope I have never failed to thank you for your donations. If you have sent money recently as "subscription" for FR, please let me know and will refund it. (Some of you have not paid for the books you ordered. I do not have time or inclination to send bills and reminders.)

Another thing: A great part of our operating expense has been in sending the printed mailout. Now that we are relieved of that, some of you may wish to direct your money to more urgent causes. That is fine with us. You have never left us to beg! If our working fund begins to deplete, we will let you know. Thank you. The rest of our ministry will continue as usual, if the Lord wills. Thank you for your prayers.

If any of you would want the 40 printed (not bound) issues of *Freedom's Ring* consisting of nearly 300 (8½ x 11) pages, please let me know. If there is enough interest, I will reprint lacking copies to complete them. That would include most of the first five issues titled *Hook's Points* also. I would anticipate a cost of about \$30.00 per set. Do not send any money, but I will accept orders conditionally. This announcement is premature, but I wanted to get it in this last printed issue. All of my material will continue to be accessible at the web site indefinitely.

Trampling Through The T-U-L-I-P

The pioneers of our Movement, Barton W. Stone, Thomas Campbell, and Alexander Campbell, being educated

Presbyterian preachers, were well-versed in the teachings of John Calvin. As they gradually separated from their Presbyterian and Baptist influence, their efforts were given great thrust by Walter Scott. Scott let his hearers know that their salvation or damnation did not depend upon the unalterable choice of God but that God offered salvation through the Gospel which they could choose to accept or reject. Believers were more readily drawn to a God who offered salvation to all instead of only the ones he predetermined.

John Calvin developed a system of doctrine based upon the sovereignty of God through which he supposedly totally controlled the destiny of each individual, unaffected by any choice of the individual. His teachings have been epitomized by the acronym T-U-L-I-P which I will characterize briefly as follows:

Total depravity. Because of the sin of Adam, no person can make a move toward God but can only respond to the irresistible initiative of God to save him.

Unconditional election. In exercising his total sovereignty over men, he chose all who would be saved which number cannot be increased or diminished. That election was not based on any merit or lack of it that God foresaw in the chosen individuals.

Limited atonement. Instead of Jesus dying for all persons, he died to save only the chosen individuals predestined to salvation. Thus he saved them rather than just giving them the choice of accepting salvation.

Irresistible grace. Since man can not choose to accept grace, it is an irresistible gift bestowed upon those chosen by God. Since it is by God's own volition, no elect person will resist the Holy Spirit so as to be lost.

Perseverance of the saints. Those individuals God foreknew and chose before the beginning of the world for whom Christ died particularly, he has called, justified, and glorified. They have been kept from the possibility of falling away from God's grace.

My analysis probably does not meet Calvin's approval, if he is aware of our doings on earth now. If he is in torment, it may add to his misery. If he is in heaven, it does not bother him, for no one on earth can detract from one's eternal bliss. ☺

Some things I am hearing from some disciples these days are disturbing to me. There seems to be a trend toward trust in tenets of Calvinism mixed with determinism and perceived through subjectivity. Different teachers emphasize different aspects without promoting all points of Calvin's theology. They sort of "tiptoe through the TULIP" by modifying it. However, its doctrines can hardly be accepted selectively for logically all the tenets come packaged together.

If each person at birth inherits the guilt of Adam, being totally corrupted and alienated from God, then he has no power to reach out to God and no inclination to do so since he is totally depraved of all good impulses. The only possibility (he has no hope) for acceptance by God must lie in God's volition rather than his own choice. No other man can help him. Only God can change his state.

This assumes that God is totally sovereign over man so that any change for good must be initiated by God. Since the totally depraved cannot do good on his own volition, the will of God must prevail over him, even as it does over all the universe. So, before the world began, God predetermined to give immortality to certain persons while leaving the majority to perish. This choice was not based upon the goodness or lack of

goodness which God foresaw in the elected ones but upon the arbitrary choice of God. So the reasoning goes.

Further, redemption of the elect would be through the atonement of Jesus, but it would be an atonement limited to those particular persons predestined to receive God's grace. No individual could lay claim on this gift of immortality, but neither could any individual resist the sovereign will of God. So whom God chose to save, he saves---rather has already saved. Neither man nor Satan can over-power God to snatch his elect from him. Even if the person is tempted and sins, he is kept from the possibility of falling away from God's grace because he was saved by God's choice rather than his own. According to explanations, if a person who was thought to have been of the elect denies God, it only reveals that he was never one of them.

Cause and Effect

This redundant re-statement is intended to emphasize the cause-and-effect sequence which ties all the constituent elements of TULIP together.

In the last few decades there has been a refreshing reemphasis given to the grace and love of God. While it has given greater assurance to believers, it has also brought long-discussed questions into consideration again. It is my aim here to touch on over-riding principles relating to the subject. The TULIP teachings have many proof-texts; so it is not my intention to array proof-texts opposite them. You know the Scriptures well enough, I trust, to be able to discuss principles without such snippets of Scripture.

Grace by its very definition is a gift. A gift is neither an award for merit nor a payment for works achieved. God's gift of salvation is either given to all universally or it is limited to those who accept it. It is either determined by God's sovereign choice or by the recipient's choice to accept God's offered gift. It is conditional, based upon man's acceptance as Paul explained to Ephesian disciples who had received it: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God – not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8). Yet, this very text is twisted to "prove" that it is imposed by sovereign action without man's volition.

We in our congregations generally, as well as those in some other denominations, have taught that the grace is given to persons who believe strongly enough to initiate repentance from their sins and to be baptized for the remitting of those sins in application of Jesus' meritorious atonement. Thus the individual accepts the grace without any thought of meritorious works, legal qualifications, or adding any element to the gift. Actions of acceptance are considered as no more meritorious than cashing a gift check would be. However, most of those in Protestant groups have cried out against baptism being a condition to the receiving of the gift. They contend that baptism is a work, an action, something that man does in contradiction to Paul's declaration that it is not of works.

Faith and Repentance

The debate cannot logically stop there, though too often it does. If we rule out any conditional action such as baptism, then we would also have to rule out believing and repenting. Believing and repenting are both actions/works of man! How can that conclusion be avoided? Many try to evade that dilemma by claiming that belief and repentance are also gifts of God. Thus they retreat into the refuge of TULIP to the total sovereignty of God over the will of man, though they may not be ready to accept all that is logically involved in it. Then, supposedly, God gives the elect both faith and repentance.

Since by inherited depravity a person has no standing to plead his case before the Court of Justice and Mercy, he can

take no step toward God. So salvation of an individual was determined by God's specific choice before the world began; he initiates the saving action which the person cannot resist; he gives regenerating faith; and then rules the person's conduct by his Spirit so that he cannot choose to sin so as to lose that salvation. That is irresistible grace! That is determinism also.

Determinism is defined as "a doctrine that acts of the will, occurrences in nature, or social or psychological phenomena are determined by antecedent causes; a belief in predestination." It is a cause-and-effect, stimulus-and-response philosophy that denies human choice. What we have thought to be our choices were actually reactions to such forces as learning and experience. Sociologists excuse us from accountability for antisocial conduct and moral irresponsibility on that ground. This concept requires that there is really no such thing as morality and immorality, for conduct of individuals is determined by antecedent causes. And for these believers, the antecedent cause is thought to be God who, in total sovereignty, before the world was made, determined who would be his elect and who would be damned. Then he initiated the cause-effect sequence to accomplish it. Honestly, can you believe that?

Some of us have a difficult time harmonizing the concept of a good, loving, impartial God with the belief that he gave man the power of choice, knowing that most would choose not to serve him and would be damned. That approach poses enough problems, but there is no way to harmonize the love and morality of God with the thought that he determined before the world began to save only certain individuals while determining the damnation of the majority of those to be born. The concept of election by a totally sovereign God portrays deity who is less endearing than the impartial, deterministic laws of physics..

It would mean that the only ones who can praise him for his love are those who feel that they are the elect. That fosters an elitist attitude enabling selfish delight in being God's favored while the majority are not, even though their lives may be equally commendable. How can we tell each individual, "God loves you; he knows you, and he has a plan for your life," if that person must depend upon God's volition to apply Jesus' atonement, and he has already determined the damnation of the person? "God loves you – but you must wait until he chooses to give you faith and repentance which he may not have chosen to do!"

In exploring new lands where the gospel has not gone, no one has reported finding believers in Christ. Why? Simply because faith comes through receiving the evidences relating to Christ. If God gives faith to those who call upon him, that becomes contradictory. How could a person call without having faith enough to cause him to call?

Would not the grief of parents be unbearable for the infant who died without assurance that it was of the elect? Obviously, God does not choose to give faith to a new-born. Many who have believed in inherited sin have professed faith for the infant while having it baptized. Thus the belief in baptismal regeneration and a sacramental working through baptism were developed.

Assurance of Salvation

I have attended revival meetings where convicted persons went to "the altar," commonly called the "mourner's bench" to plead with God to save them. Their faith was already evident. How would they know they were lost? How would they know when they were saved? Those emotionally inclined would *feel* it! Those less emotionally inclined and more left-brained had great difficulty in receiving such evidence. Some, after numerous attempts, gave up. Thus, subjective feelings, rather

than complying with Biblical instructions, became the basis of confidence in one's salvation. How else could the *elect* be determined? By their works? Cannot an unbeliever do good works? Although inspired writers have never indicated that feelings can be trusted as evidence of forgiveness by God, a great segment of believers depend upon them for their assurance.

If those seekers could not have faith until God gave it to them, and if they were saved by faith with no action on their part, they were already saved when they went to the altar seeking salvation. If regeneration is given when faith is given, they were already sons of God and did not know it! How fickle the feelings!

Some have chided those who believe some accepting action is required of the individual by saying we cannot have any feeling of security. There is much more assurance in following clear instructions than in trusting in emotions. Maybe you trust yours, but you know others who feel they are saved whom you are sure are not saved! Right?

Suppose that you and I were together and you sinned against me. Later, as you lie in your bed, you regret what you did to me. At the same time I am in bed thinking about the incident. In feelings of love, I forgive you from my heart. Do you feel it? Certainly not. Forgiveness is in the heart of the one who forgives and is only felt in the heart of the forgiven when they learn about it. The good emotion is not the evidence but is the result of the evidence. Yet much of the assurance many sincere people are depending upon is nothing more than subjective feelings based upon wishful thinking.

In Romans 8:11 and in his Ephesian letter Paul has much to say about predestination, foreknowledge of God, and God's choices (election) of those to be his people. The teachings of Jesus and inspired writers, however, are filled with reminders that each individual must hear God's message, believe it, respond to it in order to accept salvation, and continue to respond to it in order to remain in the state of sanctification. These two basic concepts presented by Paul are true. It is not for us to choose either predestination or freedom of will. We must seek to understand the harmony of them.

With this purpose in mind, let us look at the text and its setting (Ephesians 2:8) again: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God – not of works, lest any man should boast." How had the Ephesian disciples been saved? Please read Chapters 1-3 for elaboration on the points made here. God had chosen them before the foundation of the world (age), not individually for salvation, but that Jew and Gentile would be brought into one body. It was "the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ." They had "heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it..."

Apollos had made the first converts there, knowing only the baptism of John. On his arrival, Paul learned that they had not received that guarantee of the Spirit. So they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus and then received the Holy Spirit when Paul laid his hands on them. Thus they had received the grace of God.

In later years Paul reviewed his initial work in Ephesus, "...how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21). God had granted access to both Jew and Greek through repentance toward God and belief in Jesus. The confessing and divulging

of their practices resulted from Paul's teaching and miracles there which brought fear to Jew and Greek (Acts 19:17f). These activities were involved in their being chosen of God in Christ (Eph. 1:4).

Whatever Paul taught in *Romans* about election and predestination must not be interpreted to conflict with what he supervised and taught among the Ephesians. God exercised his sovereignty in choosing Jacob instead of Esau and Israel over other nations in working his plan to bring Jew and Gentile into one body in Christ, but this does not mean that he chose Jacob and the Jewish nation for salvation while rejecting all others. The dispensing of his grace was not arbitrary to individuals but was accomplished and made known to all through his predetermined plan.

There is no indication that God gave a gift of saving faith to predetermined individuals and then gave the Spirit to control their lives thereafter. The message of the gospel to bring Jew and Gentile into Christ came first. This is taught both in *Romans* and *Ephesians*. The favorable hearing of it produced faith, yea, even fear. Effective faith is activated conviction – living faith, not dead, inert belief.

Even though we might conjecture that God, before the world began, knew and foreordained which mosquito would fly in as I opened the door, that stretches credibility beyond limits gained from the Bible. God designed natural laws by which he operates the universe. We grant that he has in instances suspended or revised specific applications. Those irregularities or variations we call miracles. If our lives are guided each moment by his unchangeable will, then natural laws do not apply to humans. In speaking of man's successes and failures, Solomon did not attribute them all to the predetermination of God's sovereignty, but he explains that "time and chance happen to them all" (Ecc. 9:11f). So there are coincidental factors that work in our lives. In exercising his total sovereignty there could be no such thing as luck or chance.

Can a human change the will of God? If not, then stop praying! If not, then stop evangelizing! If not, why seek medical aid! If not, you may abandon all safety cautions! If not, then forget about the definitions of right and wrong conduct. If not, then give no attention to the exhortations and the warnings written in the epistles promoting right conduct! If man cannot change his will, since God is not willing that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9), none will!

When God saves someone, can subsequent sins bring his fall? If he falls, is that proof that he was never saved? That whole system of teaching was still-born in Adam and Eve! They were made in God's own image by his own choosing. Were they sinners before eating of the tree? If so, that action did not bring sin into the world for it would have been here already. Their violation in Eden brought expulsion and death. Satan could not snatch them from God's hand, but they were enticed to leave God on their own volition.

Since it is undeniable that Adam and Eve sinned and brought death, was that because they were not really saved to begin with? Or is not that theory fatally flawed?

Yes, God is sovereign over the universe. Yet angels sinned. This could occur only because God gave them freedom of choice and then withheld his forceful dominion over their wills. Evidently, Satan is a fallen angel permitted to operate, not through the inferior power of God, but by the sufferance of God. And man is given a will and power to choose even to work contrary to the desires of God. Is man stronger than God? God has restrained his sovereignty over man's will, thus glorifying man in his likeness. The overpowering will of God could have

made man as responsive and as amoral as a robot. God's self-limitation gave liberty to angels and to man. []

Hook's Points

"I am appealing to you open-minded people who are not afraid to think for yourselves." Read that again. What Does that mean? "I am appealing to you to let me do some thinking for you so you won't have to think for yourselves!"

University Students: Let me remind you of a generous offer made by Bob Rowland. If you have interest in restudying the role of women in our assemblies, he will send you a free copy of his clarifying book, *I Permit Not A Woman To Remain Shackled*. Also, he will include a free copy of my book, *Free In Christ*, which I will supply. (Combined retail price: \$14.95.) Many have testified that these liberating books have changed their lives. Request from: Robert Rowland, 3619 Larchwood Dr., Corona, CA 92881-8784; phone 909-898-1947. Tell others of this offer.

Spanish version of FIC on the internet. Eleven chapters of *Free In Christ* in Spanish may be accessed at <<http://www.freedomring.org/lec/>>. The remainder should be posted soon. It is in a stage of revision and proofreading. Your suggestions may be helpful. Send yours to Moises Lujan <LUM0446@aol.com>. Blessings on him for his diligent work.

Why do the Jews and Palestinians who live in the same area have to come to the US to discuss peace? I asked that question, then proposed that money must have something to do with it. The next day I learned that our president had offered \$170 billion (he is so generous – with our money!) which they turned down. Even Christians approve being duped!

A gospel presentation on CD is offered free for your use by the North congregation in Shreveport, Louisiana (where our son, Sol, is an elder). Click on it from our site or check it out at <http://www.cocn.org/free_cd_2.html>.

In August I sent 80 free books of various titles to a brother in Manila, Philippines. He will distribute them to other preachers. Gifts from you! A church in Arlington, Texas is using 50 copies of *Free In Christ*.

Why don't we have all the conventions in the same week and have the elections the next week? We could avoid all those annoying campaign ads. Most voters have already made their decision. Why should we let the "undecided" few choose our president if they are so indecisive! ☺

Restoration Forum 2000. Each year since 1984 interested persons from the various segments of the Restoration Movement have met to discuss and promote our much-needed unity. This year the Forum will meet October 22-24 at Bethany College, the campus of the school that Campbell founded at Bethany, W.V. Well-known men from various groups will speak, including our good friend, Leroy Garrett who, dressed in pioneer garb and coonskin cap, will do his impressive impersonation of Raccoon John Smith. Campbell's home, library, college, and grave site will be visited. This is a great opportunity. There is a registration fee. To learn more, e-mail Charne Robarts at <robarts@acu.edu> or call 915-674-2180.

Preachers should be underpaid! Yes, that is right. Selflessness is a part of the profile of one seeking souls. May ministry never be chosen because it pays well. When we support native preachers in other lands with salaries far above their peers, those peers see preaching as a way of gain.

"The Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one."
-Thomas Campbell.

Your favorable interest in Curtis Dickinson's piece about hell and unending torment in the last issue leads me to include Leroy Garrett's "Is Hell Fire Endless?" in this issue. I am honored to use his great essay in this last mailout.

"The One True Church"

An attractive tract with the above title was handed me by a friend. Its sub-title declares "Jesus Built Only One Church." It was written by a respected, now deceased, brother whose name I will not reveal, for I am not to deal in personalities in my comments.

One of the things that impressed me about the tract is the familiarity of its content. I taught a similar message in pulpit and classroom many years and on the radio hundreds of times. Now it is with dismay and humiliation that I am reminded of my zealous misdirection in such teachings.

The folder-tract presents these following fourteen "Marks That Matter" replete with textual references:

BIBLE FOR HIS WHAT FOR YOURS?

Founder	Started by man or God?
Foundation	Upon what does it stand?
Beginning	When did it begin?
Designation	What is it called?
Membership	Conditions of belonging?
Worship	What acts occur?
Work	By what does it propagate?
Doctrine	What does it believe?
Organization	How is it structured?
Government	Who controls it?
Message	What does it teach?
Unity	Is it divided?
Life	To what devoted?
Destiny	Is it eternal?

Certainly, I recognize the truth taught in the many textual references in the tract which space will not allow me to review. I wish, however, to give some thoughts as to why I can no longer give interpretations and applications that I made in earlier years. My hope is that my comments may cause someone else also to reflect without being defensive.

ITS FOUNDER – CHRIST. All agree on this! Christ's *congregation - assembly – community* which the word *ekklesia* implies is not an organization. It is all the people he has saved. He continues to add to that community by saving people. "Did Jesus establish your church?" the tract asks. He adds all the saved to the one body, but not to segmented groups which reject other saved persons in other splinter groups.

ITS FOUNDATION – THE SON OF GOD. Universal agreement! But that "rock" (Peter's confession that Jesus is the Son of God) is the creedal foundation. The creed is Christ, not doctrinal teachings like the emphasis of this tract which I repeated for years. Different Christian communities build on doctrinal interpretations far more complicated than belief in Jesus Christ. And that includes us.

ITS ORIGIN – A. D. 33 IN JERUSALEM. This tract lists a number of denominations assigning a date and place for the beginning of each, like I have used many times while

asserting that the Church of Christ was begun in A.D. 33 preceding the denominations. The universal community of believers begun on Pentecost is still present, but how foolish I was to contend that a group wearing the exclusive name, "Church of Christ" with all the identifying marks of my splinter group in West Texas existed in Jerusalem and that we were that one true church exclusively. Our distinctive "Church of Christ" was first listed in the US census in 1906! The Lord, by saving persons, makes them his one church, but we join (place membership in!) segmented, denominating groups many of whom reject all others.

ITS DESIGNATION – BY APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY.

The tract asks, "Is your church mentioned by the apostles?" Finally, I came to realize that the Scriptures do not give any proper name for the church! It is unnamed. It needed no name to distinguish it since there is only one. God's congregation has many descriptions but no name "by apostolic authority" – not even the "Church of Christ"!

ITS MEMBERSHIP -- PERSONS WHO: Here conditions in accepting salvation are listed. However, obedience to the gospel does not give us membership in the church, as I formerly taught! "Church membership" is unbiblical. No one holds membership. It has no members! It is those in the state of salvation.

ITS WORSHIP – "IN SPIRIT AND IN TRUTH". How often I taught those "five authorized acts of worship" as the limitation of worship. How sad that most of my life went by before realizing that all my life is an offering to God. It is whole-life, living worship (Rom. 12:1-2), not certain rituals performed legalistically correct. There is no record of God ever rejecting the sincere worship of anyone, regardless of the form of expression.

ITS WORK – SAVING SOULS. The gospel is proclaimed by individuals. Their whole lives are dedicated to showing love to all, which includes bringing them to Christ.

ITS DOCTRINE – THE NEW TESTAMENT. The community of believers has no doctrine. It was saved by the gospel and it spread for many years before any of the epistles were written. Each group in existence depends upon its own distinctive doctrinal interpretations of the New Testament writings for its existence.

ITS ORGANIZATION – CONGREGATIONAL Because the universal assembly of God is not an organization, it follows that it is not organized "Scripturally" or otherwise. Individuals may serve God apart from any organization. When they serve together, some organization is expedient but not a requirement for acceptable service. In such organization, no person has authority over another.

ITS ENABLING GRACE – ETERNAL LOVE. All groups will agree on this.

ITS DESTINY – HEAVEN. That is the goal of all.

ITS UNITY – UNDENOMINATIONAL. I spent a career advocating unity – if others would unite with "us" – in spite of being in a splinter group of believers who rejected all others and continued to divide among our own congregations. I was in the one true church! True, the Lord had added me to his one true church, but I had chosen to serve with an exclusive, rejecting sect separated from all others in it. God forgive my ignorant zeal.

ITS UNIVERSALITY – ALL NATIONS. Surely, all church folks shout agreement to its universality. Except that in most congregations I served, the African-American disciple was unwelcome and excluded from the church roll! The question this

tract asks, "Is your church universal in time and membership?" was self-condemning when written..

ITS MESSAGE – THE GOSPEL. Yes – and no! I proclaimed the Good News of salvation through Jesus, the Son of God who died for us, was raised, and ascended to heaven. But most of my message was about the "right doctrine" and the "right church"! The gospel and Jesus faded into the background, I now confess with sadness.

ITS GOVERNMENT – AN ABSOLUTE MONARCHY. All agree that the Head of the church is in Heaven. But I was never *hired* or *fired* by Jesus! I never had to give account to him in elders' meetings! Jesus never dictated decisions for the congregation!

ITS LIFE – DEVOTION. I think people from all churches will agree our lives should be devoted to the *word* and *example* of Christ, as the tract suggests. In my experience, this devotion was demonstrated less by living in harmony with and serving the needs of mankind and was measured more by regular attendance and proper performance of rituals.

It gives me no pleasure to review so many of my misunderstandings and misdirections this tract brings to mind. It is my hope that through my sharing these thoughts you may better understand my changes and also, perhaps, see some points more clearly for your own revision in thinking.

I often wondered why so few people took tracts from our rack at church and the county fair booth about "*Why I Am A Member of The Church of Christ*" and "*Which Church Did Jesus Build?*" Now I better understand that sin-weary people want a forgiving and comforting savior, not an argument as to whose church is the "rightest" or makes exclusive claims.

It might be good for you to look through the tract rack, if your church has one. Do those tracts seek to convert one to Christ or to "the one true church"? Have we not always said you do not have to decide which church to join for the Lord will add you to the right one? Then, let us preach Christ and trust him to do it! []

Is Hell Fire Endless?

Leroy Garrett

I begin with the assumption that we will all agree, if we stop to think about it, that the "fire" of hell is a figurative term and cannot be taken literally. Just as "the street of the city is pure gold" that describes heaven (Rev. 21:21) is figurative, so is "the lake of fire and brimstone" that describes hell (Rev. 20:10). That the fire of hell is figurative takes nothing away from its horror is evident as that the gold of heaven is symbolic takes nothing from its magnificence. When God speaks to us it has to be in symbols that we can understand. Gold is precious and splendid, so he tells us the heaven is like that. Fire is dreadful and painful, so he tells us that hell is like that.

There are only three possible positions to take as to the nature of hell fire in regards to its duration. The traditional view is that it is everlasting in the sense of being unending. The conditionalist view holds that hell fire is consuming, annihilating the wicked but not tormenting them unendingly. The universalist or restorationist view is that hell fire is purgatorial in that it punishes the wicked and cleanses them of their sin and ultimately restores them to God and to heaven, which means that by God's grace eventually everyone will be saved.

There you have the three views: unending torment of the wicked; destruction of the wicked (after punishment); corrective punishment of the wicked but eventual redemption.

My position in this installment of the hope of the believer is that in the light of Scripture the first position (the traditional view) is untenable and unacceptable. It is the least acceptable of all three positions in that it has an impossible theology. That God would raise the wicked and give them immortality only to torment them in a devil's hell unendingly is both gross and vulgar, even blasphemous. Such a God is not the one described in the Bible.

The third view is a modified universalism in that it recognizes that there are indeed wicked people who will go to hell and will be punished for their sins. But the God of love and mercy cannot and will not lose the vast majority of the souls he created. He will eventually redeem all creation – the world, the universe, and all mankind. So hell fire will be penitential. The wicked will be purged of their sins, justly punished, some with few stripes and some with many, but in the end God will be victorious and all souls will be his for eternity. This fulfills Paul's promise of "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:22). Not a tiny fraction, but all, eventually.

This view is both philosophically and theologically persuasive, even intuitively persuasive, for we are inclined to conclude that yes, of course, that is what we would expect of a God who is "eager to show mercy" and is not willing that any should perish, and it also satisfies God's justice in that the wicked are punished. But it has a serious problem in that it is more theological than biblical. Biblical evidence is strong that the wicked will be finally and eternally lost, however tragic and unacceptable that may appear to us. "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life" (Rom. 6:23) is unequivocal. If the wicked eventually die because of their sins, then they are dead forever, never to live again, or so it seems.

That passage, by the way, comes near singlehandedly proving the "consuming fire" position. If the wicked die, then they do not "live forever" in hell fire. Moreover, this passage states a crucial truth that is often overlooked: that immortality is not innate in people but is a gift of God. Only God has immortality (2 Tim. 6:16). We are not destined to live forever, either in heaven or hell, simply because we are human beings, for human beings are mortal. To the contrary, we are all destined to die, not only because of our sins but because we are finite creatures. We live forever only if God gives us immortality, which he does in Jesus Christ to those who believe.

There are other texts that indicate that the wicked will perish or be destroyed (after being punished in hell fire), such as Mt. 10:28, "Fear rather Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." Again and again the Bible says that "The wicked shall perish," as in Ps. 37:20 and Ezek. 18:4. Mal. 4:1 describes the wicked as being "stubble", as being "burned up," and as having "neither root or branch." Jesus makes it plain in Mt. 10:40-43: the wicked, like the tares of the parable, will be cast into the furnace of fire and burned. As for Paul he makes it clear that the end of the wicked is "eternal destruction from the presence of the Lord" (1 Thes. 1:9). In Gal. 6:8 the apostle says that the one who sows to the flesh shall reap corruption or destruction, while the one who sows to the Spirit shall reap everlasting life.

Nowhere in Scripture will you find the idea that God bestows upon the wicked everlasting (unending) life or immortality so that he can then torment them forever in hell fire. The wicked die forever for two reasons: they do not have the gift

of immortality, and they have to receive the wages earned for their life of sin, which is death.

It goes without saying that the traditional view of unending torment for the lost has what appears to be strong biblical support, even if it does contradict the above references. I can hear her make response only to a few of the passages that are resorted to that make God "an eternal fiend that tortures his enemies forever," as Robert Ingersoll put it.

One incontrovertible proof-text is said to be Rev. 14:10,11 where "the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night." Apart from what poetic license may be taken in such a symbolic book as Revelation, the idea of torment being forever does not necessarily mean endless. If you trace the word through Scripture you will find numerous things described as "forever" that were not endless but endured as long as necessary to fulfill their purpose, such as the Jewish passover being forever (Ex. 12:24) and Solomon's temple being forever (1 Kgs. 8:13).

The word "eternal" (or everlasting) is also used in ways to suggest endlessness, such as Mt. 25:41, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels." When coupled with verse 46 where "everlasting punishment" and "eternal life" are both used, this argument appears impregnable. The everlasting punishment has to be as enduring as the eternal life, they argue.

While it is true that eternal or everlasting does sometimes mean never ending, it is not always the case. Jude 7 refers to Sodom and Gomorrah being destroyed by "eternal fire," but those two cities are not still burning. A similar reference in 1 Pet. 2:6 says those wicked cities were reduced to ashes and condemned to destruction, which is what eternal fire meant. That is, it was fire that burned until it accomplished its purpose.

"Eternal," whether in reference to punishment or life refers more to result than to process, and it is more qualitative than quantitative. The point of "eternal life" is not that it is unending but that it is life with God. And so "eternal punishment" does not mean that it goes on forever (What father would punish a child endlessly?) but that its result cannot be undone. It is the result, not the act of punishing, that is unending. So with "eternal destruction": the process of being destroyed is not perpetual but its result is final and irreversible. Sodom was destroyed and stayed destroyed; that is "eternal destruction." So with the wicked. They are "eternally destroyed" or are burned in "eternal fire" without existing forever.

The basic issue in all this is the nature of immortality. If we concede that only God is immortal, as the Scriptures tell us, then no one "puts on immortality" (1 Cor. 15:53) except as it is given by God. The Bible nowhere indicates that the wicked have endless existence or immortality. If God extends it to them, it would be so they could be tortured in perpetuity, and this is risky theology.

That God raises all the dead, including the wicked, is clear enough. But does he raise the dead to give them endless existence and perpetual punishment? Or is it not to judge them? He judges them, condemns them for their sins, and punishes them in hell. In exactly what way he punishes them or for how long we do not know, but it is probably determined by the severity of the sin, some with many stripes, others with few. Then at last they are destroyed, finally and forever.

This is the conditional view, meaning that immortality is not given to all people unconditionally, but only to those to whom he bestows grace and salvation through Jesus Christ.

This impresses me as the most defensible view when all of Scripture is considered. It liberates the Christian faith from teaching a dogma that tempts people to see God as some cosmic fiendish savage. If the God of heaven subjects innumerable billions to unending and indescribable torment, it can only be seen as the one infinite horror.

If on the other hand it is as Paul says, "The wages of sin is death," it will be seen as at least understandable if not just. Even men sometimes execute their fellows for crimes committed. But when they hang them or electrocute them they do not keep on hanging them or electrocuting them in perpetuity. They are hanged or electrocuted "forever" in that its result is final and cannot be repealed.

(Restoration Review; Leroy Garrett, Editor, Nov. 1990. Used by permission.) []

What I Hear From You

→ I greatly enjoy your section of comments by readers. These comments are always encouraging! To realize that many people are learning to be free from salvation by legalism and that salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ is great!! -Frankie Shanks, Poplar Bluff, MO

→ My story is similar to many others you may have heard. I have been preaching for 30 years after attending Lubbock Christian University. The past ten years have been one of the grand journeys of my life. The waters of legalism nearly drowned me and they reflected my preaching and life. But I began to see what that kind of religion was all about. It just wasn't me. I wanted to be free in Christ. I know you can help me. In the past few years I have finally learned about Jesus. Yes, I know all about the church but little about the Savior. Your website is a breath of fresh air. I praise God for His leading you to me. I pray that you will have many long and useful years of service to him. -<haldeb@texasonline.net>

→ Your site is of great assistance to me. You explain God's message very clearly. Thank you -Barry Sullivan <Roscoe07@webtv.com>.

→ I just wanted to thank you for your enlightening thoughts. I am a recent graduate from a Church of Christ college. I enjoy your site and the *Free In Christ* book. I am so very excited about the way many Churches of Christ are waking up to relevant change, although that change is coming slow in the Chattanooga area. Please encourage people to stay in the Church of Christ fellowship, if for no other reason than to renew our original mission and the fact that there will be so many good people surprised on judgment day when they realize that their rituals and comfortable life didn't earn them salvation. -Signed.

→ I am a grace-oriented, evangelistic, spirit-led, experienced minister looking for a grace-oriented and Christ-centered congregation who loves Biblical, contextual, edifying sermons. -Don Stevens, <dcs@pointecom.net>, Burton, TX.

→ I have been raised in the Church of Christ all my life. I'm 22 years old. A few months ago a friend and I started studying the Bible and praying for the truth. He had already been noticing the problems of the Church of Christ. We started understanding how the condition of your heart, and having true love for God and people were the GREATEST commandments. Also, more about the Spirit's role in our lives. I had never really heard a lot about that before. We started sharing these ideas and concerns with people. Of course, they refuse to believe that

is a problem or they try to work their way to heaven, rather than by faith. I am so thankful for this web site. Praise God, I'm not crazy!! -April.

→ We here at CACC, were just introduced to "Free In Christ" by our minister. I know God is using the minister in our congregation to speak the "Truth" through each message. This book is just one of the many ways God uses people for His glory. Thank you, Cecil, for all your efforts. May the grace of God be your guide, and the peace of the Holy Spirit comfort you always. -Veronica Ewing <veronicaewing@aol.com> Arlington, TX.

→ I have just finished reading your book, *Free In Christ*, and was amazed at that which has been my beliefs for years so parallels your writings. I have a difficult time expressing what I believe the Bible really teaches us so I plan to use and pass your book very freely. To me it seems that the preachers almost from the start have spent most of their time on the mechanics of what they believe important and man must

so often I SO look forward to Freedom's *Ring*. You are the only thing that keeps me sane in a world of "Christians" telling me how "fallen away" I am.-Brooke <barefoot@accutek.com>

→ I just want to say bless you, bless you, bless you. I have been a member of the church of Christ since I was a baby and I am now 37. I have become very upset lately over the church's stance to hang on to doctrine for dear life. I am learning God cares much more about your heart and how you show Christ in your life than whether or not you attend a COC church every time the doors were open. As a child I developed panic disorder because we not only had sins of omission but also of commission so I was always scared to death I would commit a sin and die and go straight to hell. I know you have probably gotten a lot of resistance by your writings; but I implore of you to keep it up. Rhonda <rdcoker@earthlink.net.>.

do and yet they seem to ignore the very clear and simple teachings of "Love your neighbor as your self." Love is totally forgotten when people disagree on the where, when, and how. I think of the hours and even years that men spend agreeing and disagreeing on the mechanics and how little time is spent on loving our neighbor and brethren and telling the world of Christ. How many books and tracts are printed each year by the preachers fussing. How many hours people meet together and come away no better off for the time spent. We convert a person to the "Church of Christ doctrine" and not to Christ. Is it any wonder that we do not grow in love and numbers. -Donald Hunt, Horseshoe Bend, ID.

→ Just a personal note to thank you again for your teachings. They continue to help me in my daily study and growth. Brother, I have only been preaching for 30 years now and it seems like the more I preach the more inadequate I feel. Honestly, there are times when I stand before the congregation and truly wonder if we are anywhere close to where Jesus would have us. Maybe I am revealing my own lack of faith by making statements like that. I wonder sometimes if we preacher types help promote and maintain a comfortable distance from God. Does that sound strange coming from a preacher? Over the last year we have preached and studied through the Gospel of John and the Epistles of John, and I have found in them a very simple message: God is Love and that love is shed abroad in our hearts through Jesus. And the power of God finds its expression through our love for our fellowman. Does that sound right? Has my lack of love for others left God powerless? I don't mean in the absolute sense – God is all powerful – but in the sense of touching the hearts of those who don't know His love. Could this be the very reason that we have lost some of our ability to influence the world for good? Don't misunderstand, I am probably as happy and as filled with joy as ever in my life. But I do so want the Lord's people to be, not only bearers of the Good News, but a people who experience in real life terms what this all truly means. -Gordon McElvany, <tantex@trip.net>.

→ I have given up all other e-mail Christian publications that I was receiving, BUT you still hit the nail on the head