

The Gospel Plus What?

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

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

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

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

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

The saving gospel was proclaimed effectively long before any epistle was written. Nothing has been added to it since Pentecost. The apostolic letters were no part of it. Those letters were written for the benefit of those already saved by means of the gospel. Those epistles were intended to produce fruits of conduct in accordance to and consistent with the gospel, but they are not the gospel (1 Tim. 1:9; Phil. 1:17). If all the New Covenant writings are the saving message, then all must understand and obey everything in them in order to be saved. That would have excluded the early church in Jerusalem. That would leave all of us out! (Please read *Free In Christ*, Ch. 8 and *The Twisted Scriptures*, by Carl Ketcherside, Ch. 4).

To assert that the apostles and prophets taught orally everything that was in the epistles previous to their being written is without foundation. Those were personal letters to

specific people. Prophets might have taught all the principles involved in the epistles, but Jesus had already taught those principles before the prophets.

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

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

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

Appointment of elders and deacons over congregations is not mentioned in the Gospels, so that is an essential we learn from the epistles, you may be thinking. Where did you get the idea that our eternal welfare is dependent upon appointing elders and deacons? Surely, one would have to do a lot of reading between the lines to make congregational organization an essential to acceptance by God. What about those in the congregations where Timothy and Titus were instructed to appoint elders -- were they unsaved until elders were appointed? How eager we have been to make laws for God!

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

God's timeless law (principle of action, not a code) is love toward him and our fellow man. It is the principle of action written in the heart which the eunuch could always

know and follow. It is the universal, unchanging principle. To those who groaned under the yoke of the code given through Moses, Micah emphasized the simplicity of God's expectations of them: "He has showed you. O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8).

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

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

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

Paul exhorted the younger evangelist, Timothy, "*But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired of God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work*" (2 Tim. 3:14-17). The sacred writings in which Timothy had been taught were the Old Covenant scriptures. We have commonly misapplied this, indicating that Paul referred to the New Covenant writings which were non-existent at the time of Timothy's nurturing. Proper application of Paul's words made a startling impact upon my understanding.

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

generation of disciples. Were they lost without understanding those great theological matters? Paul gave no indication of such.

On his way to a camp, a traveler may stop at a crossroads and inquire, “How do I get to Paradise Camp?” The reply may be, “Take the right-hand road at the intersection and stay on it all the way.” There is no mention of distance, terrain, condition of the road, markings along the way, or intersecting roads. After hours of uncertainty, he finally arrives at his destination with relief. But how much more pleasant his trip would have been if he had had instructions and markers all along the way to confirm that he was still on the right road. The epistles confirm our route.

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

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

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

Christ’s body which we call the church was, and always will be, produced by the Gospel plus nothing – not even the apostolic writings. Those communications deal with expediencies in the function of followers of Christ. The person who adds an essential makes it into “another gospel” and comes under Paul’s anathema (Gal. 1:6-9).

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

(This is a reprint of FR 40 with some revisions. Other related thoughts are in *Free To Accept*, Chapters 16, 17, 18, 19. Cecil Hook; February 2002.) []

