

Free as Sons

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CHAPTER 1

FREE AS SONS

In the times when men enslaved their fellowmen, a person might have had two men serving him with entirely different attitudes and relationships.

One of these men, being a slave, served out of compulsion and fear. When he failed to please his master, there were fearful consequences that had to be faced. Born out of his slavish fear, however, was one security. When the master specified in detail all of his duties and the slave fulfilled them, he could feel some security and acceptance. It was a security through accomplishment and perfectionism, but the sense of security was always overshadowed by his fears of inadequacy. The slave could perform his service with no love, admiration, or oneness of purpose with his master. That is a spirit of bondage.

The other of these two men was a son of the master. He served his father out of a sense of belonging, acceptance, love, and unity of purpose with the father. This son knew that his security and acceptance were dependent upon his relationship rather than his ability and diligence to achieve. His confidence was in the unconditional love of his father. His service was in gratitude for the father's love and sustenance rather than to meet demands of specifics and quotas set by the father. This young man was free from the fears of inadequacy in performance and he was free to exercise himself creatively in a loving relationship expressive of love and joy. This is the spirit of freedom that sons may enjoy.

The slave pictures the disciple whose fears are at least partially relieved by his law-keeping through which he seeks to perform to specified standards and quotas. It is a spirit of bondage to law. The son represents the disciple who serves out of loving response to God's love and continual acceptance of him as his son while the disciple knows that he can be nothing more than an undeserving sinner at his best. The spirit of the sons of God is a loving response to the grace of God rather than keeping laws to obtain grace.

Jesus has assured us, "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36). Although Jesus is the one who sets us free, some disciples are apprehensive of the freedom. The spirit of bondage may make the yoke of law seem desirable and freedom seem fearful. A woman who had spent a number of years in a monastery as a nun renounced her vows and entered into secular life again. When asked concerning her greatest problem of readjustment, she readily responded that it was in making so many decisions. As a nun, her regimented life was prescribed for her as to her residence, schedule, dress, meals, and social activities. Her freedom brought responsibility, and responsibility demands choices. This responsibility may be frightening to a person conditioned by bondage to legal righteousness.

A License to Sin

The anxieties felt by those of the spirit of slavery lead them to suspect that freedom from legal justification is a license to do as they pleased a license to sin. These children of Hagar interpret

according to the flesh. The children of the free woman live by the Spirit, being ruled by a higher nature. Paul explains, “So then, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh for if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship” (Rom. 8:1-2f). The sons of God have a higher motivation than law and a nobler relationship than that of a slave. In our crying, “Abba, Father,” we are not exercising a legal right but we are recognizing our acceptance as children of God.

Jesus made us free. Paul is the great champion of our freedom, sounding a call for freedom, defending it, and giving a challenge to all who are free. “For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another” (Gal. 5:13). Paul would have us to follow the Spirit rather than a code of laws so we will respond to an internal control instead of an external one. The Spirit works through our intelligence and understanding in guiding us.

Freedom of Sons

Religion can satisfy neither man nor God unless it satisfies the intelligence. Intelligence, motivated by its conclusion of faith, leads one to hunger and thirst for right emotionally. The desire to do what is right is a fundamental virtue without which one cannot be acceptable to God. Bondage to a system of law may constrain a person into conformity out of fear of the consequence of nonconformity while there is still resistance both intellectually and emotionally. Man is not free if he is driven by what he does not value or choose, and he cannot value and choose except to the degree that he comprehends. Service to God through imposed laws which one neither understands nor values is a spiritual slavery not fitting the sons of God. Such might even be more carnal than spiritual. For the spirit to be free, one must find satisfaction and happiness in following his own higher motivation to do what is good and right. He gives himself willingly and happily, but to give himself he must first own himself. He cannot properly dedicate himself if he is not free. Jesus gives us this kind of enabling freedom.

The spirit of bondage, rather than freeing one of his carnal nature, may cause him to test the law, strain at its limitations, and seek loopholes to justify exploits of the flesh. Thus we may find ourselves to be modern scribes and Pharisees defining with hairsplitting detail the limits of what we interpret as the divine code. Carnal deeds done in the name of religion and for the sake of it are among the darkest of history, appalling for their extravagance of hatred, vengeance, cruelty, greed, and lust. The carnal person may observe “Thou shalt not kill” while cursing, hating, and oppressing his brother.

The other extreme is true also. A person may claim his freedom as a son of God to use as a license to live according to the flesh. So it is not too shocking to learn of persons on whom we have looked as spiritual leaders being involved in all sorts of licentious immoralities and greedy and aggrandizing schemes. Neither of these extremes is inherent in the freedom which Christ gives, but they are the ditches on either side of the road of highest intention.

An Inner Control

In the new covenant relationship, the change in the nature of control was prophesied by Joel, “I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts” (Heb. 8:10). By this God was not pointing to a time of the memorization of laws, formulas, systems, or codes, but to a time when his people would have an inner control. This would not be laws written on tables of stone or parchment but it would be principles written on the conscience. No longer being yoked by a law which brought death, the disciple’s heart would be attuned to the Spirit of life.

While I was in college, some of the students managed to get the questions for the test to be taken the next day. We knew that this was not the most upright thing to do, but rationalizing that grades were a contest between the student and the teacher, we were able to justify our improper actions.

At another time, my brother, George, and I missed an examination in the class of Homer Hailey. When we asked him to let us take a makeup examination, Brother Hailey handed us the questions, saying, “Here are the questions; you and George may take them home with you and answer them. I know that you won’t cheat.”

Would we cheat on that test? Certainly not! Not even a little peek at my notes. Why not? He had put me on my honor causing me to determine what kind of person I was going to be. My inner nature was called upon and my response had to come from within.

In similar manner, God has put us in his honor system to see what kind of persons we will be. Rather than trying to evade the “All-seeing Eye watching you,” we serve conscientiously because we hunger and thirst for that which is right. He calls us not to be robots stiffly doing his bidding, but as his friends and sons who have his aims and goals in our hearts. The internal rule gives us conviction and courage to travel God’s road even though none go with us.

We might prefer to have everything defined in plain and simple terms so that we would have no hard decisions to make about our conduct as disciples. It might seem preferable to have an explicit code of law like the Law of Moses recorded in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. God’s claim of the tithe and firstborn was spelled out. One’s lawful food could be a sheep or goat but not a pig or mule, and he could eat bass or perch fish but not catfish or oysters. One needed not to be concerned about being a priest unless he was a Levite. The sacrifices expected were specified in detail. The rules were about as “black and white” as words could make them.

Those of us who cannot accept the reality of freedom would like to know the percentage of giving expected, and if it is on a sliding scale determined by the number of dependents, as in figuring our income tax. They would like to have a description of the clothing permitted so decisions would not have to be made and interpretations would not be necessary in each generation and society. Since modesty in clothing relates to the expense of it, how much may one spend on clothes, jewelry, hairdos, and cosmetics? How much of the body must be covered and what areas may be exposed? How formfitting, transparent, clinging, and revealing may it be and still be decent? And where is the chart or code that defines the amount of permitted consumption, or prohibition, of alcohol, nicotine, caffeine, and various kinds of drugs? If these

things were all spelled out, we would not have to make decisions. It would be an external control like that over a slave. Rightness would be in keeping within all the legal limits. But as sons, we are free to make daily decisions, difficult as they may be, based on the highest of principles and the noblest of motivations.

Be Free Men

Paul says that we have been freed from the Mosaic kind of law; however, he is not saying that Christ has no law or that we are without law, but that his law is of a different nature a guiding by principles of action. When we might yearn for subjection to a code like Israel yearned to return to the slavery of Egypt, Paul would recall us with, “Christ set us free, to be free men. Stand firm, then, and refuse to be tied to the yoke of slavery again” (Gal. 5:1).

It seems that at some time those who seek to make Christ’s law into a legal code would have gone through the New Testament scriptures and listed all of his laws. The Law of Moses was a code, and the Jews could list 613 laws in it. In some generation it seems that someone would have cataloged Jesus’ laws. Have you ever tried that? You will become totally frustrated in such an effort because the law written on the heart involves principles. Commands, instructions, teachings, and exhortations only expedite the fulfilling of the law of the heart.

In thinking of freedom, one might visualize a ship in the vast Pacific Ocean with no engine, sail, or rudder. Although, in one sense, the ship is free of controls, it is driven by the external forces of wind and current and can reach no harbor or goal. That is not the kind of freedom we are looking for in Christ, but it is the very thing that Paul is warning about in our *Galatians* passage: “You, my friends, were called to be free; only do not turn your freedom into license for your lower nature.” Freedom is not being free from guidance but in being led by the Spirit, who bears witness with our spirits that we are sons of God.

Working for someone else, a person may feel entrapped and enslaved by time clocks, schedules, and quotas to meet constantly. The desire to be free from all of that is strong. That employee may buy out the business and become free. Now, instead of an eight-hour schedule, he may work ten or fifteen hours each day. He is no longer meeting schedules and quotas to fulfill requirements, but his interest now is in making a success of the business. He has something different in his heart. His freedom from a boss is not a license to loaf, indulge himself, or take the easiest path.

Our liberty is not permissive living. The lower nature fights against the spiritual nature. “I mean this: if you are guided by the Spirit you will not fulfill the desires of your lower nature. That nature sets its desires against the Spirit, while the Spirit fights against it. They are in conflict with one another so that what you will to do you cannot do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law” (Gal. 5:16f NEB).

Paul continues: “Anyone can see the kind of behavior that belongs to the lower nature: fornication, impurity, and indecency; idolatry and sorcery; quarrels, a contentious temper, envy, fits of rage, selfish ambitions, dissensions, party intrigues, and jealousies; drinking bouts, orgies,

and the like.” Although one may be free to do these things, the gates of heaven are doubly locked against him.

We must reap of the Spirit of the law written on the heart. “But the harvest of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law dealing with such things as these.” The harvest of the Spirit begins with love and ends with self-control, and that’s what the law written in our heart is all about. Love is higher than any code, needs no law to regulate it, and requires no specified ritual for its expression. The just man has the hunger and thirst for righteousness, and “The law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, etc.” (1 Tim. 1:9).

We always have to get back to love, don’t we? Back in the beginning sentence, Paul urges, “But be servants to one another in love. For the whole law can be summed up in a single commandment: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” The harvest of the Spirit comes from keeping the whole law which is summed up in one commandment and is written on the heart of the son of God. This is his guarantee of freedom from bondage to a code of law.

How obvious all of this is. The spiritual service of the son begins with love and ends in self-control. He needs no code of law to control his conduct for he has an inner control. He is loved, accepted, and forgiven because he is a son rather than in reward for flawless conduct and meritorious works. Being filled with and guided by the Spirit, he stands in the strength of the Lord and the power of his might. The son is free from bondage to a code of law intended to control his carnal nature and free from the fears resulting from the ineffectiveness of such controls. His inner control of love casts out his fears.

(Some of the points were gained from a taped lesson by Wesley Reagan.)

CHAPTER 2

DOES “GO YE” MEAN “GO ME?”

Does the “Go ye” of the Great Commission demand that each disciple of Christ join in evangelizing the world? Our “personal evangelists,” “soul winners,” and campaigners make this an inescapable obligation for each of us. They make us feel so guilty about it that we are swept into their systems and programs, whether we are capable or not.

The unsaved must be evangelized, but all disciples are not equipped for that task. Paul informs us in First Corinthians 12 that there are various gifts and functions in the body and that all are not the same member, whether a hand, foot, eye, or ear. He assures that “God arranged the organs of the body, each one of them, as he chose. “He did not choose all of us to be teachers. Paul emphasizes this point by his rhetorical questions: “Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers?”

Notice that Paul did *not* write, “And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, *everybody* evangelists, some pastors and *everybody* teachers.” (Eph. 4:11). Neither did Paul urge, “What you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to *each disciple* who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2).

While many well-meaning men have taught the truth about the differing gifts and functions in the context of these passages, they have conveniently twisted the scriptures and contradicted themselves in order to involve us all in their programs of evangelism. They tend to make anyone feel guilty who does not become active in evangelism. They also use Proverbs 11:30 as a text for “winning souls” without considering that the Law of Moses was not evangelistic, nor did it save souls, and that the passage teaches nothing kin to soul winning, except as it is misstated in the King James Version.

Am I making light of evangelism? My career has been spent in efforts to save my fellow sinners, and I am not making light of that. There is a misdirection that I am trying to correct, a misdirection that would identify the body as the local assembly with its members being the eyes, ears, hands, and feet. All of the expressions of these differing gifts are brought under the systematized program of the group, planned and overseen by its elders. Any member who does not work in and through the system is made to feel disloyal and nonproductive and to be resisting the elders. If anyone uses his “contribution money” in private ministry, he is thought to be robbing God, for his money must be given to the church (elders) so it can be used “in the name of the church” so God will get the glory!

In line with this, we hear much about the work of the church, meaning, of course, the local organized work. Seminars are conducted on how to build a strong church, which is the local corporate group. Ministries are defined, departmentalized, and organized for corporate action headed up by one person who may be a professional minister. So, letterheads and bulletins of the church list the recognized, and often hired, ear, eye, hand, and foot of the local body. Organization often bottlenecks and frustrates in some areas for assignment is made to persons

with no gift in that field. A group which meets together must necessarily have some organization, but it is preposterous to think that elders, deacons, or committees may choose and assign and oversee your life ministry for you.

This developed concept denies, or at least minimizes, that God gives us private ministries. We are members of the body at large. As members of that body, God has given each of us a gift, or gifts a ministry, or ministries. Each person should recognize his or her own gift and use it to the fullest in individual ministry. This does not mean that one should be disloyal to the local group, work against its interests, or fail to bear some of the financial responsibility for its essential needs.

A person may accept evangelism for his or her ministry. He may serve by proclaiming the gospel, by writing, by correspondence courses, or by use of the media. He does not have to ask anyone for permission, report to anyone, ask for money from the church, or operate under a church program. It becomes his own ministry into which the Spirit has directed and enabled him. If others wish to help enlarge his opportunities by support, that is their privilege.

A person's talent may be in a vocational or business field. Through it, or its rewards, that person can develop a life of private service. God can use us where we fit in our circumstance of life. To use our circumstance to increase our wealth and pleasure, even while tithing to the system, is to misappropriate the gift that God gives us.

A family, having a special love for children, may take homeless children as their own as their life's ministry. They involve their whole beings in providing the proper care and upbringing of these children. Their money is not put into the church treasury to be sent to an orphanage so the system can perform the ministry, but they fulfill their God-given ministry. Their "contribution money" is used directly, and no apology for doing it is due the local assembly, the elders, or anyone else.

For years the church here has been sending a token monthly amount to three children's homes and Christian Home of Abilene. Last year a couple was assigned to represent the interests of each home to the congregation. Because of their special interest in Christian Home of Abilene, one couple chose to work in its interest. The home needed a van. This couple wanted to raise money to help in its purchase by selling home-crafted products. The church program did not readily allow for such. So, they enlisted the help of other interested persons and, in a few months in a private ministry of making and selling those products, they were able to deliver a brand new Ford passenger van to the home. Depending upon a church organized, sponsored, and supported program, the home would have continued to get the token amount as usual. In this private ministry the church did not have to enter the picture either for approval or finances. In such a loving way our gifts can be used most effectively.

God has given you a ministry which can be totally free of church-related tensions. Oh, that I had realized that forty-five years ago! In this life of service, you are accountable to God. You may use your time, money, and abilities in doing what you are most at ease in doing. Yours may be serving the poor, correcting social ills, teaching, evangelizing, writing and distributing free literature, caring for an invalid (whether kin or not), serving the mentally ill and handicapped,

helping with problem children, reaching those in prison, rescuing those addicted to alcohol or drugs, serving the aged, shepherding, or encouraging and supporting others in their ministries. The field of service is as broad as the needs of humanity. Any of these, or a combination of them, can be your private field of service. When you give yourself to it, you need not feel guilty because you cannot do all of them, or even the one your best friend does. To become “jack of all trades, but master of none” is not the most sensible course.

Although I have enlisted many children for bus routes and Vacation Bible School by cold canvas door-knocking, I do not recall ever having converted one adult in my countless such efforts. I no longer feel guilty because I do not go on such door-knocking campaigns since admitting that God did not give me that gift. Some persons have that gift; let them serve God by it without making others who do not have it feel guilty or inferior.

While my career ministry in the framework of the system and its program has not been dismally ineffective, it has been filled with the frustration of failure due to working in areas where I had no gift, the tensions in trying to please the system, the conflicts of not meeting the demands of those in charge, and self-reproach for not being effective in all aspects of the spectrum of programmed activities.

Since retiring from church programmed ministry, the Lord has given me a private ministry through writing. Perhaps, such was meant for me from my youth. Through my first book alone, in the last two years, I have taught an average of 450 person-lessons per day lessons which were not readily acceptable in my pulpit. I can do this without asking anyone, without answering to any but God, and free from the tensions inherent in the congregational ministry. I did not know before that life could be without tensions! This is the type of happiness and joy of service that the Spirit intended for us to have through use of his gifts in individual ministries. Most of our tensions about religion relate to our participation in the organized program of the church.

Yes, “Go ye” means “Go me,” but only in the ministry into which God called me. Through it, hopefully, others may see my good works and glorify our Father who is in heaven. Such works may be more convincing to the lost than our doctrinal argumentation. And that is evangelism also.

CHAPTER 3

ARE WE REALLY BORN AGAIN?

In the new birth, does a person actually become a new being, or is the concept of a new birth a literary device describing the change affected in the life of a convert to Christ?

Nicodemus had some trouble in understanding what Jesus meant about the requirement of a new birth, and he has plenty of company yet. We accept Jesus' explanation that it is not a second birth from one's physical mother but, in accepting the idea of a spiritual regeneration, do we understand it as being the bringing into existence of a new creature?

There is a natural birth and a spiritual birth. Jesus explained, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6). In the birth of the water and the Spirit, "We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed" (Rom. 6:6). We died with Christ, were buried with him by baptism into death, and were raised with him that we might walk in newness of life. "And you he made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). Being baptized into Christ, we can be assured that "if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation (or creature); the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17).

These and other references speak of being born again, being born anew, being raised, being made alive, being regenerated, becoming a new creature, receiving newness of life, and putting on the new man. In this transaction one becomes a son, or child, of God which, in analogy with natural birth, would indicate that a new life comes into existence. These expressions seem to indicate that a new spirit-being is initiated into life replacing an old, dead, discarded one.

All of this brings some questions. Is the spirit immortal? If only the reborn being is immortal, then the unregenerate life must cease to exist. If the unregenerate life is annihilated at baptism, then it endures no punishment. If we accept the premise that a new life is created in the new birth, we must conclude that only the reborn person who becomes apostate is subject to punishment. The reborn person will suffer everlasting punishment.

Metaphors are only one of the many literary devices used in scripture. A metaphor is a figure of speech where a word literally denoting one idea is used in place of another to suggest likeness or analogy between them, like Jesus saying he was a door, a vine, or a shepherd. So, an abrupt, sanctifying change of life is referred to as a new birth. The change initiated by faith which produces repentance confirmed by baptism is like a person putting off one life and putting on another. An old identity is repudiated and a new one is established with Christ involving new desires, aims, goals, and purposes.

The physical body is not changed in this conversion process. Each organ still functions as before. The body is still responsive to the same desires, instincts, and inclinations. Although there is help in controlling the appetites, the alcoholic is still tempted by alcohol, and the sexual interest of the lustful is not diminished by some act of God in the new birth.

In the new birth personal traits are unchanged. The person has the same knowledge, memory, experience, self-image, abilities, and emotions as before baptism. While it is true that the convert will have a new determination and added help to use and control these, these elements were not refined and changed by an act of the Spirit in the person. We, not the Spirit, must “put to death” our sinful nature (Col. 3:5). In the conversion process the old, sinful person is not perfected by an act of God but, through the grace of God applying the merit of Jesus, the person is accounted as pure and innocent and as though righteousness were actually accomplished in him. Because of the sinner’s faith, righteousness is imputed to him. He is justified by grace through faith rather than being transformed into a different kind of person by the Spirit.

Being baptized into Christ, the guilt of sin is remitted by Christ’s atonement. That guilt had brought separation and alienation from God, which is spiritual death. Life forgiveness, reconciliation is restored when the believing sinner is united with Christ in baptism.

Even though we may all admit that the references to the new birth are metaphorical, there may be some lingering doubt, or even serious objection, in the mind of some. The metaphorical explanation credits the change within us to our own reception of, and response to, the gospel. It leaves out any change directly affected in the individual by the power of the Holy Spirit. Upon our obedience to the gospel, doesn’t the Spirit enter into us to change us into the kind of person Christ wants us to be? Isn’t that a work accomplished for us and in us?

At this point, our inherited sacramental concepts mix with thoughts of achieved righteousness to cloud our vision. According to the system of the sacraments, when certain prescribed rites or ceremonies are performed, grace is infused into the soul and, by this means, God makes us pure and righteous and the kind of person he wants us to be. This calls for infused and achieved, or accomplished, righteousness rather than the sinner being accounted as righteous when he can never be anything but a sinner. The one concept is that of baptismal regeneration Ð a change worked in the individual through a sacrament to make him acceptable. The other concept is that of justification on the basis of faith, in which imputed justification is metaphorically termed as a regeneration or new birth.

It is true that we receive the renewal in the Holy Spirit in our washing of regeneration. This is done through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, which pouring out is the same as was fulfilled by the baptism of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, for the same word used in quoting Joel in Acts 2:17 is used by Paul in the next reference in speaking of his outpouring on us in our washing of regeneration. This identifies the gift and the baptism of the Spirit as being the same. This is stated comprehensively by Paul: “He saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:5f).

The Spirit cannot be poured out literally so that men may be filled with the Holy Spirit literally, nor can one be baptized in the Holy Spirit literally by immersion into and emersion out of him. Neither can we believe that the Spirit literally inseminates water so that it gives us birth. This must have its metaphorical aspects, but it does not deny the activity of the Spirit. The Spirit does

not overpower the individual to do his work for “the spirits of the prophets are subject to prophets” (1 Cor. 14:32).

I cannot understand or explain how the Spirit gives me life, lives in me, and works in me, and I doubt that anyone else can either. I am still not in position to speak condescendingly of Nicodemus’ lack of perception. Nicodemus could not understand the mysteries of the wind but he could see the undeniable effects of it. I have evidence of the working of the indwelt Spirit that surpasses the usual subjective, individually perceived evidence when I see the fruit of the Spirit in the life of the one who claims the promise.

CHAPTER 4

THE SACRIFICES OF CAIN AND ABEL

Cain and Abel, the firstborn of mankind, offered sacrifices in worship to God. Cain offered the fruit of his labors from the field while Abel offered the fruit of his labors from the flock. Abel and his worship were accepted by God while Cain and his offering were rejected. We read: “In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel brought of the firstlings of the flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard” (Gen. 4:3-5). This brief account has greatly influenced our understanding of acceptable worship.

Why was one sacrifice accepted and the other rejected? Was it an arbitrary choice on God’s part? Few of us would conclude that God acts in such partial and arbitrary ways.

Generally, it has been concluded that Cain’s sacrifice was rejected because he did not, like his brother, offer a blood sacrifice in an effort to atone for his sins. But I, and others who are smart like I am, have offered a different explanation which goes something like this: Abel offered by faith (Heb. 11:4); faith comes by hearing the word of God (Rom. 10:17); so Abel did what God told him while Cain did not. Cain, according to my explanation, might have offered the wrong thing, the wrong amount, at the wrong time, in the wrong place, in the wrong way, with the wrong attitude, or for the wrong purpose. He had many possibilities for displeasing God! A sort of Russian roulette in reverse! What a fearful approach to worship!

However, more recently, while reading Hebrews 11:4 through my accustomed theological glasses, something happened. I don’t know if my glasses slipped or if the truth just jumped from the page and knocked them off; but, without those tinted lenses, I saw the passage in a different light. Let me tell you what I saw.

Other persons in history have offered blood sacrifices in abundance and found their worship to be displeasing to God. To a sinful nation that had forsaken the Lord, God cried out through Isaiah, “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls or of lambs or of the goats” (Isa. 1:4, 11). A similar rejection of Israel’s sacrifices was uttered through Jeremiah (Jer. 6:20). Hadn’t God commanded those offerings? Yes, he had, and they were blood offerings.

The Lord was a witness against his evil people (Micah 1:2) by rejecting their offerings: “With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:6-8). They had forsaken righteousness of the heart justice, kindness, humility and were seeking to attain it through prescribed rituals of worship.

God bore witness of their righteousness or wickedness by accepting or rejecting their sacrifices. It was not the details of the offerings that were being inspected but the heart of the worshipper. It has always been true that “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but the prayer of the upright is his delight” (Prov. 15:8). “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination; how much more when he brings it with evil intent” (Prov. 21:27).

The man was being judged rather than his offering. “And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard” (Gen. 4:4f). Notice that it does not read: “The Lord had regard for *Abel’s offering*. but for *Cain’s offering* he had no regard.” The emphasis is on the man: “The Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.”

Now, let us look at Hebrews 11:4 again: “By faith Abel offered a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he received approval as righteous, God bearing witness by accepting his gifts.” God bore witness to Abel’s righteousness by accepting his gift.

By his rejection of Cain and his offering, God bore witness, not to an improperly detailed ritual of worship, but to the wickedness of the man. Many centuries later, John, the apostle, recognized Cain’s evil nature and urges “that we should love one another, and not be like Cain who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother’s righteous”(1 John 3:1 If). Cain was evil in heart, and the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination. John does not say that Cain was evil because he killed his brother, but that he killed his brother because he was evil already. John indicates that he did not love. Hatred toward his brother before he offered brought God’s rejection and was the motivation for his murderous action.

Abel did not make an offering to achieve righteousness. He was righteous already because of his faith. God bore witness to that fact by accepting him and his offering.

Cain, on the other hand, evidently sought to achieve righteousness by rituals of worship when he was evil in heart.

That was a problem in Jesus’ day also. Because of their obstinance, the Jews kept traditions which nullified laws, and then they had the audacity to worship. So, Jesus rebuked, “You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrine the precepts of men’” (Matt. 15:7f).

Jesus addressed the worshipper who might be angry or disrespectful of his brother: “So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5: 23f). The frightening thought is that of worshipping God with an evil heart rather than slipping up on some ritualistic detail.

Unfortunately, we have followed Cain’s philosophy in too many instances. We have endeavored to be righteous by scrupulously keeping holy details of ritualistic worship. Instead of worship

being an expression from upright lives, we have made it an effort to please God through certain formal exercises. It is not, for example, a matter of refraining from singing during the Lord's Supper and from participating in it on weekdays, or from singing with instrumental accompaniment, but of worship flowing from clean hearts.

Although the Genesis account tells what each man offered, it does not indicate that acceptance or rejection was due to what was offered. Each man offered the fruit of his labors. That is in harmony with our responsibility toward our talents and of God's acceptance of what a man has and not what he has not. In certain cases, God has specified details of worship, but men have also worshipped acceptably through actions neither commanded or instructed by the Lord.

Because Abel acted "by faith" does not necessarily mean that he had been instructed concerning his offering. It is common to misapply Romans 10:17 here: "So belief cometh of hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ' (KJV). Paul is here defending the acceptance of Gentiles. The promise was that "everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved." How was it that they came to believe and be saved? They must have heard; so God had sent the preachers who had gone at the word, or command, of the Lord in the Great Commission, not on their own initiative. So, God was responsible for their belief. Exercises of worship are not under consideration in this passage.

At this time I do not recall an instance in the Bible record where God rejected the sincere expression of worship of any righteous person, even though his particular acts of devotion were not commanded of God.

Previously, the tint of my theological glasses allowed me to see in the story of Cain and Abel a severe warning that I not slip up on any ritualistic detail and thereby fall short of attaining righteousness and God's approval. Without those glasses, however, I can see that righteousness, which is graciously imputed because of faith, will bring forth loving rituals of adoration and spontaneous expressions of praise for what God has done for me. I trust that he will bear witness that I am already righteous because of his offering, for I cannot achieve it by my own worship.

CHAPTER 5

SILENCE SAYS SOMETHING

Although our movement has developed the criteria of Scriptural command, approved example, and necessary inference for authoritative guidance, the most consistent thing about our use of that rule is our inconsistency in applying it. We avoid or “explain away” imperative instructions like “greet one another with a holy kiss” and such commanded examples as that of washing of feet, and we have never been able to agree on what is necessarily implied. Some conclude confidently that the silence of the Scriptures concerning the use of instrumental accompaniment to singing strongly implies that such is sinful, while others say the silence implies that such is acceptable.

Frankly, I cannot believe that God would make eternal life or death dependent upon our ability or inability to judge debatable inferences of a legal system. Sometimes, however, silence speaks and its message may be used as corroborative evidence. So, please let me make a point briefly that is supportive of that idea.

Throughout Old Testament history, God’s people were warned against the pitfalls of the cultures about them. They were warned especially against the idolatry of the neighboring peoples. Some of the Mosaic regulations were in reaction to, and a safeguard against, the idolatry which was so popular and infectious in their world.

Jesus warned against popular and accepted evils such as outward show of piety, the perversion of law by traditional interpretations, and the exercising of lordship by religious leaders. He corrected the common notion that the worship of God was to be centered in Jerusalem or Samaria.

The letter composed and sent out by the Jerusalem conference to the Gentile disciples was no attempt to define all sinful activities, but it was a warning against prevalent and accepted evils among the pagans such as sexual unchastity and eating of things sacrificed to idols, blood, and what is strangled all having to do with idolatrous practices.

Various lists of sins are given in the epistles. Why were they not exhaustive lists and all alike? Each particular list included the prevalent sins threatening the ones being addressed. Paul’s instructions concerning women identifying with the cult priestesses by headdress and insubordination, for instance, were not given in all his epistles but only to the Corinthians and Ephesians where those things were local threats.

Paul warned the Thessalonians against idle, nonproductive lives because that was a sin characteristic of that city.

In the latter part of New Testament history, the great philosophical threat to Christianity among the Gentiles was Gnosticism. John deals with their teachings extensively in his epistles, and Paul gives warnings also in letters to Timothy and the Colossians.

Now, let me get to my point about instrumental accompaniment to singing. Such music was generally accepted in all societies. The Jews were familiar with the temple orchestra, or band, dating back through the centuries. David encouraged the use of instruments in praise, and he wrote some psalms to the Chief Musician to be accompanied by specified instruments. The Jews of the First Century used those psalms, and Paul encouraged Christian use of psalms.

If I should tell you that I heard Willie Nelson sing in concert last night, you would not conclude that he sang *à capella* due to the fact that I did not mention that he played his guitar also. Because accompaniment is so common, when mention is made of singing, accompaniment is taken for granted unless the exception is mentioned. So it would be with mention of the singing of psalms.

No doubt, the pagans sang some good secular songs, but it would be more characteristic of them to sing the bawdy, sexually oriented songs of the drinking party and songs expressing their idolatrous concepts. This would be a cultural temptation to disciples. In facing this, Paul did not forbid singing at social gatherings, but he urged that they use such occasions to teach, exhort, and up-build one another by using psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, influenced by the Holy Spirit rather than alcoholic spirits or pagan, demonic spirits. His instructions (Eph. 5:18f; Col. 3:16) give no indication that he is dealing with church assemblies, but the contexts reveal that he is dealing with social relationships.

In view of the common use of instrumental accompaniment, both among the Jews and other societies, posing a universal threat, if such were sinful, it seems imperative that Paul and other inspired writers would have warned the disciples against that ever-present threat to their souls. Many lists are given to identify sins prevalent in their society, but the use of instruments in praise is not in one of the lists! The silence says something! It says that it was a matter of indifference.

When proponents of the use of instrumental accompaniment point out that God was pleased by their use under Moses, we have been quick to reply that the Law of Moses no longer applies as a guide or model for us. We have declared that one could as easily justify the keeping of the rituals of the law as the use of instruments, and that the keeping of Jewish rituals was abolished with the law. To keep such would be to fall from grace, we have contended, for when Jesus died on the cross, all such rituals became offensive to God.

Is that contention true? When Jesus died, did God suddenly come to hate all Mosaic rituals of worship? In our saner moments, we can admit that Jewish disciples continued to circumcise without incurring God's wrath as long as they did not make circumcision a condition for salvation (Acts 15). Moses was still preached in every city with apostolic approval. We can see that Paul would not let the keeping, or lack of keeping, of holy days and dietary regulations of their heritage become matters by which to judge a Christian's faith (Romans 14). Paul cut his hair in a ritual relating to a vow which he took. In Judea, "many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed; they are all zealous for the law." To prove that he was not teaching against keeping the law, Paul agreed to observe the ritual of purification and pay the expenses of others under similar vows. This would require a sacrificial offering at the temple (Acts 18:18; 21:17-26).

Rituals of the law could be, and were, kept by Christians long after Jesus died on the cross. Neither Paul nor other apostles or prophets objected to that. What Paul objected to so uncompromisingly was the performing of such services in an effort to find justification. Justification had to come through the sacrifice of Jesus alone, but those expressions of devotion and worship through Mosaic rituals were not intended for justification.

In view of God's acceptance of worship through Jewish rituals by Christians, why was instrumental music, which was a part of Jewish worship, not specifically condemned, if, indeed, it was sinful and displeasing to God? Why would Paul and others be silent about that threat to their souls? To say that the music was not authorized by Christ or his apostles does not answer the matter. Neither were those other observances by disciples authorized by Christ or his apostles. But they were authorized under the law, and their practice was continued by Jewish Christians with approval. Although they were not commanded or required of all disciples, those practices were acceptable.

Yes, silence says something. It says that it was a matter of indifference.

CHAPTER 6

BODY LANGUAGE

The life of the disciple is a continuous offering to God. Such a living sacrifice is incessant worship. Some actions are performed directly to God, such as our formal worship, while others are services to our fellowman which are accounted by Jesus as unto him. All of our communications with God, such as prayer and praise, are worship whether such devotion is private, with others, or in an assembly. Worship in spirit is in the heart but it is communicated by word and action.

Language is a means of communication with God. Much of the meaning of our verbal communication is expressed beyond words in what we call body language. Through bodily posture, motion, countenance, and gesture, we express feelings of the heart which words may fail to reveal. In fact, true body language may betray the falsity of our words. This body language, expressing the feelings of the inward person, also becomes worship along with the verbal utterances which it accompanies, enhances, and enriches.

There are numerous examples of people expressing praise beyond words. As Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on the donkey, the people spread their coats and leafy branches before him in worshipful gesture and rejoiced, praising "with loud voice." Zechariah, foreseeing this event, declared that they should shout aloud. Plain words could not express the feeling adequately without the shouting and demonstrations.

Perhaps, Mary was too timid to tell Jesus that she loved him, for there is no record of her doing so, but she worshipped him by her emotional action of anointing. So it was also with the sinful woman who washed his feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair in worshipful adoration.

Numerous instructions would have us involve body language. Jesus told us that, when persecuted, we should rejoice and leap for joy. The bodily presence of the elders in the sickroom, along with the anointing and laying on of hands, is an unheard speech which adds to their prayer. The holy kiss and the veil, clothing, and hairdo of the woman all carry bodily messages.

One may not know what to say to the dying, the bereaved, or the distressed, but his or her presence speaks a comforting message. The embrace, kiss, handshake, and touch convey feelings louder than words. The emotions of the prodigal's father were communicated by his hugging, kissing, and celebrating with a feast, including music and dancing, in addition to his words. In our assemblies, the bodily presence and cheering countenance of each person is strengthening to the others.

Emotional body language is called for by Paul when he exhorts us to weep with those who weep and to rejoice with those who rejoice. Such feelings may bring forth sadness and tears or smiles, laughter, singing, leaping, exultation, and dancing. Like the lame man whom Peter healed, we

may find ourselves “walking and leaping and praising God” with body language joyously expressing our praise.

The Corinthian disciples said “amen” to voice their approval. Such a meaning of approval is also expressed bodily by nodding, clapping, standing ovation, laying on of hands, and shaking hands.

Prayer is a form of worship, and so is the bodily posture which expresses submission, reverence, and adoration, whether it be bowing the head, standing, kneeling, falling prostrate, looking heavenward, or lifting up of hands. None of these postures is of value if it does not express worshipful feelings of the individual. They must reveal the spirit. The posture that best expresses for one person may not convey the sentiment of another.

Intensity of emotion and dedication may bring forth a sad countenance, downcast eyes, fasting, shouting, leaping, dancing, clapping, cheering, singing, or even the cutting (shearing) of the hair as in Paul’s case once. Entering into the spirit of the singing, one may pat his foot or pulse rhythm with the hand. The preacher, intent with his message, may pace, gesture, pound the pulpit, and speak very loudly. His body language becomes a part of his message. If preaching is an action of worship, so must this unspoken part of it be worship also. If singing is worship, so must be all of the body language that is involved in the expression of the worshipful sentiments of the spirit.

A person may perform rituals of worship while his or her body language falsifies the words being uttered. Even in worship, haughty eyes and the condescending look, like the praying Pharisee displayed, convey an attitude that God hates. The richness of dress which puts to shame the poor and speaks of outdoing others in finery is immodest to the Lord. It humiliates those who have not. Such dress speaks the language of haughtiness and selfishness. To copy the styles of the immoral, as the women in Corinth were doing, identifies the woman with the immoral through unspoken communication.

In our serving today there is need of awareness of the power in physical expressions in order that we may employ them effectively in our service and worship.

The person who tries to limit us to five actions of worship is always faced with the problem of defining exactly what is included or excluded in those procedures. When defining worship to be in certain lawfully detailed formal exercises, one necessarily limits worship to a segment of the life. The whole-life, living offering concept, which Paul specifies, cannot be harmonized with the concept of worship being limited to certain activities at certain times.

Worship is not just formal actions, but it is an expression of the sentiment of the heart. Body language, with all its nuances, can communicate the mood and sentiment of the worshipper. Surely, all persons do not express adoring, prayerful, and exulting feelings in the same manner. Paul would neither bind nor prohibit prophesying and tongue speaking, but he would not permit prophets and tongue speakers to be disruptive in the assemblies, and we may look at body language from the same perspective.

CHAPTER 7

REPENTANCE BEFORE FAITH

This may not be news to you more studious fellows, but recently it caught me by surprise: In the three passages where faith and repentance are coupled together, repentance precedes faith (Mark 1:15; Acts 20:21; Heb. 6:1f). I had long been aware that some teachers contend that repentance comes first, and I knew that they use the first passage as their proof-text; but how could anyone be so misled as to think that a person would repent before he believed, for faith must be the motivation for repentance.

As simple as that seems, it does not explain those three pairings of repentance and faith. It is not sufficient to assert that the inspired writers simply gave no attention to sequence. So, let us look at each of those references.

1. “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel’” (Mark 1:14f). Jesus was addressing Jews who were already believers in God. Because of their lack of fidelity to him, and in view of the approaching kingdom of God, they were called upon to repent toward God and to believe the good news concerning the kingdom.

That explains the first reference to my satisfaction, but how does it fit the other two?

2. In Acts 20:21, Paul includes the Greeks along with the Jews, “...testifying both to Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Of the Jews we might expect repentance based upon their belief in God, the very thing Peter called for on Pentecost, but how could we expect that of the Greeks who were outside the realm of God’s chosen people?

Greeks, along with all Gentiles, knew God through nature (Rom. 1:18-32). God has revealed himself to all men sufficiently to expect honor and thanksgiving from them. Whether they lived in Athens, Nineveh, or wherever, or whenever, God commanded repentance of the ungrateful and dishonoring ones. In all ages and places, man has been accountable to the moral law to love his fellowman. In this chapter, Paul enumerates their violations against one another. They should have demonstrated “what the law required written on their hearts” (2:14), but they had not. So, they should repent toward God and believe in Jesus Christ, for, “There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for every one who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek” (2:9f). Conviction, penitence, and repentance cause one to seek for relief, thus opening the heart for belief in, and acceptance of, Jesus. It is ineffective to preach Jesus to impenitent people.

3. This idea is taken back a step further in Hebrews 6:1. Here the repentance precedes faith in God. A “foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God” is an elementary doctrine of Christ the premise that religion starts out with. Religion begins with man realizing a need, an inadequacy, a guiltiness. Such a realization opens the heart for faith in a deity who can meet his need, and it ultimately leads to faith in God and Jesus as his answer.

These points I have put forth reveal two defects in my approach to evangelizing. First, I proclaimed a Jesus who, supposedly, gave us a law by which we were all condemned, and now he seeks to save us from the condemnation. It makes Jesus as much a condemning lawgiver as a forgiving savior not a personification of Good News!

If I push you into a well and then throw you a rope by which you may climb out, I am not much of a hero, am I? We commit an injustice when we picture Jesus as having pushed us into the well of condemnation by giving a law which we break and then being eager to help pull us out, if we are willing to struggle hard enough. Instead, Jesus found us in the well of hopelessness and condemnation and is eager to lift any trusting soul out of it.

Jesus has told us, "For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17). All men are condemned already. Jesus continues, "He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the only Son of God." It is a matter of an already condemned person coming to Jesus for salvation rather than him coming to Jesus to learn of his condemnation.

Preaching to the untaught should first deal with man's guilt due to his violation of the law written on the heart. Yes, we should first preach repentance! The penitent can then be led into faith in Jesus. Thus, Jesus becomes the Good News of salvation, not the bad news of condemnation.

The new life process begins with faith which is preceded by repentance from dead works. The repentance from works of death opens the way for life-giving faith. How can a person have life-giving faith while performing dead works? Of course, there must be a motivation toward repentance, and at least indirectly, this must be faith in God. By instinct man reaches out toward a higher power. A person who is unformed about the true God, in recognition of the futility of his life and the violation of the law of his heart, may hunger and thirst for righteousness out of his poverty of spirit. That person is no longer at enmity with God; so, the God who comforts those who mourn will satisfy the hunger and thirst because his heart has been opened. As this person is taught, his instinctive faith will grow and continue to produce the fruits of repentance. At whatever stage of faith a person has reached, an impoverished spirit and hunger must precede further development of that faith into a mature trust.

This repentance precedes his faith in the gospel and continues to grow afterward. Robert Milligan, in his comments on Hebrews 6:2 in his *Commentary on Hebrews*, explains that faith and repentance nurture each other: "And hence it is that faith and repentance have a mutual reflex influence on each other. Faith leads to repentance, while repentance again serves greatly to increase our faith, and especially that element of it which relates to the heart and which we call *trust* in God".

In the second place, I fear that I have spent too much of my effort in trying to produce faith in impenitent people. If a person has no conviction that he is a hopeless sinner in need of salvation, he may well feel that religion is some sort of superstitious enslavement. That would not sound like good news to him.

Both of the robbers being crucified with Jesus joined the chief priests, scribes, elders, and soldiers in reviling Jesus. One of them, however, came to realize that he was condemned and, seeing in Jesus his only hope, called to him in faith, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

On Pentecost, Peter did not proclaim Jesus as a lawgiver whom they had failed to obey, or offended. He convicted them of working against God’s plans and purposes by rejecting and killing the one whom he had sent. Their penitence was evident through their cry of despair, “Brethren, what shall we do?” Peter then confirmed their need for repentance toward God and of their need of accepting Jesus through baptism in his name. Once cut to the heart, they could, without hesitation, happily accept faith in Jesus as the answer.

When Paul approached the Athenians, on the contrary, he began in an effort to produce faith in God which would call for repentance based upon the additional premise that all will be judged by Jesus. This proved to be one of Paul’s less successful attempts in converting.

In the narratives of the conversion of the Samaritans, the eunuch, and Cornelius, no demand was made for repentance. These sincere worshippers had not been rebellious. They needed only to extend their faith in God to include and accept Jesus.

Although Jesus identified himself to Saul on the road to Damascus, he was not introduced as his Savior until Saul had endured three miserable days of penitence and repentance.

This is not to say that faith should never be dealt with first. Some may trust their present misguided efforts in pagan or perverted concepts, like the Jews who trusted in a righteousness of their own, so that they must be brought to belief in God and Christ as their authority in religion first.

When we can convince the unbeliever that, through his violation of God’s timeless law to love God and man which is written on his heart, he is in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity, his heart may be open to believe in Jesus as the Good News of God’s salvation.

CHAPTER 8

I WONDER

I wonder if you and I wonder about the same things. Let's compare. Here are some things that I wonder about as my mind wanders.

I wonder why that, in Bible class art work for children, we never see any dinosaurs entering the ark with the other animals.

I wonder why we have no interview with Lazarus after his being raised from the dead.

I wonder if a preacher would still be qualified after a sex change operation.

I wonder why a woman can write out an announcement for a man to read in the assembly but cannot read it herself.

I wonder how all that fossil fuel could have gotten underground in the Middle East without disturbing the topography with which the Garden of Eden is identified.

I wonder why the Spirit would say "about twenty-five or thirty furlongs." Didn't he know the exact distance? (John 6:19)

I wonder how the kangaroos got from the ark to Australia and why they suppressed their reproductive instincts till they got there, leaving no progeny in other parts of the route.

I wonder, if man had been six-fingered, would we have arrived at six steps of salvation and six acts of worship?

I wonder why instead of asking God to give the preacher "a ready recollection of the things he has prepared," we don't pray rather that God would give him something of depth and relevance to say, even if he has to depend upon his own memory and notes in delivering it.

I wonder if, presuming that it is sinful for a woman to teach a man, when a woman prophesied by the Spirit, she sinned if she ever revealed to men what she prophesied.

I wonder why we have no biography of Jesus written by Mary.

I wonder if a person can really think of *nothing*, for, if he thinks of it, it must be *something*.

I wonder why the old folk who wish they could go ahead and die so as to be with the Lord are usually so careful that they hardly give the Lord a chance to take them.

I wonder if humming of spiritual songs is singing or playing, or is it neither, being a separate “act of worship.” And, is it the tune that is spiritual, or the words, or is it the thoughts and feelings which they nurture that are spiritual worship?

I wonder if ancient people ordinarily talked in poetic form like Job and the other characters in *Job* did. Or, were they all inspired by the Spirit to speak poetically? If so, were not all their expressions inspired messages from God rather than their own thoughts?

I wonder where Adam got the tools with which to dress the Garden of Eden. Would “necessary inference” demand either that God made them for him, that Adam invented tools, or that they had hardware stores then? And I wonder, if the father of the race had tools, how do we account for the fact that certain tribes of his descendants did not have them later?

I wonder if a faithful disciple who lost his identity through amnesia and lived a sinful life in his new identity would be saved or lost.

I wonder why God did not lead man to develop better paper and invent printing and better methods of preserving records before giving us the Scriptures.

I wonder why God made such an incomprehensibly vast universe when such an infinitesimal part of it would be inhabited by man or serve his needs.

I wonder what we mean when we sing, “My life will end in deathless sleep where the soul of man never dies.”

I wonder why undenominational churches always become undenominational denominations.

I wonder if there were any women Pharisees.

I wonder why the Holy Spirit did not organize his material better when giving it to men.

I wonder why the Holy Spirit did not give us one “book” on each of the subjects of worship, elders, women, marriage, divorce, etc. Listing all applicable rules, regulations, specifications, and restrictions.

I wonder why God made some snakes to be poisonous and others not.

I wonder why our super-scrupulous people will include a song in our hymnals which has no spiritual connotation in it “Precious Memories.”

I have wondered also why a spiritual reformer is a saintly prophet, if I agree with him, but he is a fanatical heretic, if I disagree with him. I wonder why God does not reveal his will to each of us individually so that we may all have equal opportunity and a common understanding.

As we sing of our God being “beyond the azure blue,” I wonder if we are really trusting that he is in, with, and about us at all times.

I wonder why the Israelites and the prophets never spoke of Adam and Eve.

I wonder why preachers are seldom invited back for guest appearances in the congregations with which they formerly worked.

I wonder why the Lord does not always put the desire to preach and the ability to do so in the same men.

I wonder why the Lord lets us do our most energetic work while we know the least and then lets maturity be taken away by old age.

I wonder what the carnivorous animals ate on the ark.

I wonder that God would let most people be born into this life through natural instincts or lust instead of purposeful desire by parents.

I wonder if Carpus' wife had already cleaned house and given Paul's coat to Goodwill by the time Titus went by to pick it up (2 Tim. 4:13).

I wonder when I shall meet that person who is "satisfied with just a cottage below, a little silver and a little gold."

I wonder if God overlooks our conduct which results from our bad genetic inheritance, or is that the iniquity of the fathers visited upon the children to the third and fourth generation?

You have been psychoanalyzing me by noting the things that cause me to wonder. I wonder what your diagnosis is!

CHAPTER 9

CAN I KNOW?

“I believe; help my unbelief!” is the willing confession and anguished plea of a sincere man torn between faith and doubt (Mark 9:14-22). Do you identify with his turmoil of mind? We all have a mixture of faith and doubt, but we are just not supposed to admit any doubt! We are supposed to have a Pollyanna sort of faith.

Suppressed doubts fester and infect faith. Confronted doubt purifies faith from error. Honest doubt is a new aspect of truth standing at our door, knocking for entrance into our lives.

I would suppose that no one has 100% faith or 100% unbelief. In varying degrees, the combination of these is in different persons. Most people seem to avoid either extreme. They do not have conviction of faith to dedicate themselves to God exuberantly, and they are not sure enough of their doubts to enable them to be comfortable atheists. While many speak of believing in God, the shallowness of their conviction allows them to use God’s name as a byword or to curse by.

Even from my earliest remembrance, I had questions of doubt about religion, though I was not rebellious against it. As an older teenager, I decided to attend Abilene Christian College so I could learn all the answers in order to have no more doubts! But we soon learned that the most devout and learned man has more unanswered questions than he had as a spiritual infant. Formerly, he not only did not have the answers, but he did not even know the questions.

Let us think of a man living in a deep well. Looking upward, he can see sunlight, clouds, lightning, and stars. He has many puzzling questions about what he sees. He begins to climb out. As he climbs, many questions are answered, but his view broadens and other questions are raised. Climbing to the surface, he has learned more, but his questions are multiplied. So it is in the field of search and learning. There are always unanswered questions. One of my questions is: Can I know?

God’s will for us is practical. Unless I begin with that premise, there is no point in my going further in my quest to learn and do his will. If to learn and do his will demands that I know all truth and conform to all of it, then hope flies out the window, because that is impractical. Most of us who have sought to follow Jesus have never had a course in logic and have not been too literate. We have never occupied the ivory towers, or even the church studies. We confess our lack of knowledge and we are often confused by the confusion of the modern scribes who occupy those places.

Perhaps I can know some things. I *know* the sun is shining beautifully this fall morning. However, it could have ceased three minutes ago and I would not know it for another five minutes. I *know* that one plus one equals two sometimes. A pound of sand and a pound of gold may be two pounds separately but are not so combined, because they are measured by different

standards. I know that I should give consideration to the weak brother, but I don't always know who he is and what his point of weakness is.

Let us consider one Biblical subject: The Holy Spirit. Can I know about the Holy Spirit? I have no physical evidences to prove his existence. I have not seen, heard, felt, tasted, or smelled him or proved his existence by demonstration or logical equation. I believe that he exists and works, but that belief is based upon evidences which fall short of proof.

I believe that I have received the Spirit, that he lives in me, and that he works in my daily life, but I do not know that for sure. That belief is based upon other beliefs belief in the Scriptures, belief that I understand them sufficiently, belief that I have complied with the prerequisites for receiving the Spirit, and belief that I see his workings in the course of my life.

Because the Ephesian disciples were assured that they were sealed with the Holy Spirit, I believe that I am sealed also. But what does that mean? I have some ideas as to what that means, but I cannot know that my understanding is correct.

I am convinced that I should not resist the Holy Spirit, but I don't know for sure if I am resisting him or not. Does resisting the Spirit mean resisting the word of God, resisting subjective inclinations, or both, or something else? I don't know. Can you know that you know?

As an indwelt person, I am urged to be filled with the Spirit. What does that mean? I have some positive ideas as to what it means to be filled with the Spirit but I don't know if they are correct or not.

When a disciple is led by the Spirit, does that simply mean that he is guided by his understanding of the Scriptures, or does it include guidance by his reasoning abilities and his subjective feelings, or by all or none of these? Who knows? I don't know.

As I read Jude's instruction for us to pray in the Holy Spirit, I run into another area of uncertainty. I don't know if I pray in the Holy Spirit or not, for I am not sure that I know what that involves. Do you know?

Further, I am warned not to grieve the Holy Spirit, and I really don't know if I am grieving him or not. It is possible that my not knowing these things about him grieves him, or, perhaps, it is my thinking that I know when I don't!

Ours is a religion of faith. We walk by faith, not by sight. Faith is assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things not seen. Subjectivity may be based upon emotions, imagination, or wishful thinking. Faith is more than subjectivity. Knowledge is based upon proofs and demonstrations. Faith is less than knowledge. Faith on some point may be so strong that we say, "I know," but some subjectivity has colored our thinking when we do.

Although we have evidences sufficient to create life-changing convictions, that faith must ever be tentative, awaiting modification or change as more evidence is gained or understood. Otherwise, faith could neither grow nor diminish.

Are you confused and dismayed by all of this? Here is the cheering, comforting part. Righteousness is imputed to us because of our faith, not knowledge. If I could know and do all truth, then justification could be earned and merited instead of being a gift of grace. But how much faith is necessary? Enough for you to accept Jesus and turn your life over to him in obedience.

The effectiveness is not in the power of one's faith but in the object of the faith. There is no value in putting one's self through a torturous, disciplinary process in an effort to develop a mentally energetic faith powerful enough to save. If that could be accomplished, it would be a work of merit.

One person may have casual faith that his boat will take him safely to the distant shore, while another person "psyches up" his faith to the point of believing that he can swim that impossible distance. Which person will reach the shore? The object of the faith, rather than the intensity of faith, is the determining factor. The effective faith simply utilizes the boat which has the capability. So, we can relax and trust in Jesus rather than the energy or intensity of our faith.

Perhaps, you are thinking that I am ignoring that Jesus said, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. "There we have it! We can know the truth. It frees. Error cannot free. Then, can I know, and be freed by, the truth about what happened to Amelia Earhart, how petroleum was formed underground, or the cure for cancer? "No," you protest, "we are speaking of Biblical truth." Then, can I know, and be freed by, whether Jesus was in the tomb two or three nights, who wrote *Hebrews*, or the signs of Jesus' coming?

There are no life-giving facts. Facts and evidences lead us to him who is *The Truth* and *The Life*. Life and freedom are in knowing him in a saving relationship, not knowing all the facts about him. This knowing him is by faith and might involve some subjectivity. We can know facts about him and still not know him; we can know him while not knowing many of the facts about him. We are walking in the truth (but without knowing all the truth) when we are living in him.

Jesus rebuked some: "You search the Scriptures for in them you think that you have eternal life, but it is they that bear witness of me." Their interest was in Scriptural, factual truth, but they missed him who is the Truth. Our devoted search for Biblical truth may be no more effective than was theirs.

It is questionable that the human mind can ever grasp the whole of any fact. The mind interprets data, incomplete as it must ever be, in light of what it already knows, or presupposes; thus, ultimate truth may continue to be beyond its comprehension.

In climbing my Mount Nebo, I am given a view of my previous wilderness wanderings and also of the promised land of truth before me; but, like Moses, I will not be privileged to enter in. Faith glimpses the panorama of truth without ever comprehending all its details.

Even with my enhanced view, I still cry out, "I believe; help my unbelief!"

CHAPTER 10

ULTIMATE LOGICAL CONCLUSIONS

In the early days of the Herald of Truth radio program, a lesson was given concerning evolution. I appropriated that readymade discourse for my use on a broadcast. In the broadcast I emphasized that a person could not believe in evolution while believing in God and the Bible at the same time. That seemed to me to be the ultimate logical conclusion one would have to reach on the subject.

As soon as the lesson was completed, the announcer motioned for me to come to him in the control room. With an expression of bewilderment, he explained to me, “You said that a person cannot believe in evolution and believe in God and the Bible at the same time. I believe in evolution and I also believe in God and the Bible.” I was taken by surprise and cannot remember how I answered him.

Could I protest that it was impossible for him to hold those beliefs while he confidently declared that he held them? Could I tell him what he believed or did not believe? I could argue that, taken to its ultimate logical conclusion, one could not believe in evolution without denying God and the Bible.

From that experience I was impressed with a lesson that has been reinforced many other times since: People often form beliefs without reasoning to the ultimate logical conclusion. And I suspect that none of us are exceptions. Let me give some specific illustrations.

Children born into, and growing up in, this world must be subjected to pain, suffering, sorrow, and death. Because the road to life is narrow and will be traveled by the few, most people will have extended misery through eternity. A few will make it into eternal bliss, but the chances are slim. With this in view, only a cruel, fiendish sadist would bring a child into this world, gambling that its soul would be among the few. Now, is that not an ultimate logical conclusion which we are forced to reach? Yet, few of us reach that conclusion. We stop short of it and go ahead and bring children into the world. We just don’t carry our reasoning to the ultimate logical conclusion.

When we consider the doctrine of election and predestination, we non-Calvinists quickly reach the ultimate logical conclusion that, if individual election is true, there would be no need for evangelism. In fact, it would be senseless and futile, for no one could change the state of the elect or non-elect. So, those who believe in election refrain from all evangelism, don’t they? Not at all, for many of them are the most aggressive and diligent evangelists and missionaries. They do not reason to our ultimate logical conclusion.

Millions of disciples believe that a child of God cannot sin so as to lose his soul. In our refutations of the impossibility of apostasy, we reason that the belief gives license to sin and undermines any initiative to live a clean life. So, all of the Baptists are licentious profligates, aren’t they? Not really. They are known for their firm stand on moral issues. Their lives are as

clean and dedicated as those who believe that they can sin so as to be lost. They do not follow our reasoning to our ultimate logical conclusion.

One may reason that the person who denies the word-for-word inspiration of the Scriptures or believes that the Bible accounts have some errors denies the validity of the Bible. We reason that, if one rejects a part, he must reject all, for the Bible stands or falls as a unit. That seems to be an ultimate logical conclusion, but many persons stop short of that conclusion.

There may be a vast difference in what is theoretical, logical, and practical, for there are gaps in our knowledge, understanding, and logic. No one can be truly consistent, and our own ultimate logical conclusions are not always so ultimate or logical. We can accept in faith without understanding ultimate logical conclusions.

Can that faith that lacks full understanding be effective in saving? If not, who then can be saved? Faith may even be based on erroneous ideas mixed with true ones and still be true faith if it leads one to Jesus. Faith itself cannot save; Jesus saves. Only that faith which leads us to accept and follow him is necessary.

Belief in the impossibility of apostasy, election, and many other questionable doctrines is harmful only if it weakens the faith or causes one to turn from holy living.

To reach “ultimate logical conclusions” and then reject all those who do not reach the same conclusions is to become a judge with a sectarian spirit. Paul forbade those who reached ultimate logical conclusions which differed concerning eating meat, observing days, and practicing circumcision from binding them on one another.

CHAPTER 11

ERRORS IN PETER'S SERMON

Those who assert themselves in teaching, whether by speech or writing, make themselves vulnerable to the opposing critic. Most of us welcome discussion of what we have taught, and we try to answer honest questions and objections. But often the critic is so intent on refuting the message that he becomes unscrupulous and irrational, and he employs all sorts of prejudicial and misleading devices to accomplish his purpose.

To illustrate my point, I will play the part of the overzealous critic of Peter's sermon on Pentecost. I will number my objections to his speech for a purpose to be seen later. So, let's look at Peter's errors.

1. Peter was drunk. Can we believe a drunk man, especially in spiritual matters? Of course, like most drunk persons do, he denied that he had been drinking, but can all those good people who were close by and detected his drunkenness be wrong? He even had the audacity to attribute his drunken babble to the working of God's Spirit! He was under the influence of the spirit all right, but it was the spirit of alcohol.
2. We have ample witness to this man's boasting, lying, cursing, and even denying that he knew Jesus. Only gullible fools would trust their eternal welfare to such an unscrupulous man and his shocking teaching.
3. Peter was a shrewd opportunist, knowing "when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em." He was plainly seeking to grasp the fallen mantle of Jesus and to ride on his popularity with the common people to make a name for himself and money also.
4. Just read the gospel accounts to see how unstable this man was emotionally. He would jump out ahead of the crowd in exuberance, impetuously going off halfcocked to the embarrassment of Jesus and everyone else. Then he would retreat to the pit of discouragement and tears. He was manic-depressive. Who can trust his soul to the incompetence of an emotionally unstable person like that? He's of the kind who see flying saucers or think they are reincarnated heroes of ancient history.
5. Peter was the same type as Theudas, Judas, and Barabbas. He just came at a more opportune time. Those, and other radical leaders, actually helped to pave the way for Peter. No doubt, he learned some helpful lessons from them. They were all zealots grasping for leadership and power.
6. Just as our politicians drop time-honored names with quotations from men like Jefferson and Lincoln to support their declarations, Peter quoted, or misquoted, from David and Joel as though they had the same thing in mind that Peter was contending for. It was actually a form of nationalistic flag waving.

7. If God were changing his system of religion for all men, as Peter claimed, God would have spoken and worked through his authorized channels of the High Priest, the priesthood, and the rabbis rather than through an unschooled fisherman with no credentials.

8. When Peter quoted David and Joel, he actually misquoted both of them. He changed the Scriptures! Can we trust a spiritual guide who deliberately changes the Scriptures to prove his point?

9. Peter plainly misapplied the words of Joel, for Joel spoke of drastic things like blood, fire, vapor of smoke, a darkened sun, and a bloody moon. All flesh did not receive the Spirit as he supposed, nor did women prophesy. If all that much of the prophecy was not accomplished, how could he say that Joel's words were fulfilled then?

10. Peter considered himself superior to all of the great teachers among the Jews. Why had none of them come up with the same interpretation? Peter would prove all the respected scholars to be in ignorance and error and overthrow the long-established religion of Moses in one short discourse when his tongue was loosed by new wine. What bigotry!

In the foregoing, I have made no effort to be fair or logical. I did not even stay with the proposed discussion of the errors of Peter's sermon, but I slandered the man, as most critics are inclined to do. My effort has been to show the techniques used by irresponsible critics. Let us now look at the kinds of devices used. The numbering will match the previous numbering.

1. Attack the teacher's credibility. Accusations and insinuations need not be proved for they serve their purpose unproven. Let the burden of proof be on the defense.

2. Attack the character of the teacher. Never mind that he has repented, changed, and matured. Can a leper change his spots?

3. Impugn his motives. Even the good one may do or the truth that he may teach is invalidated by his evil motives.

4. Question his competency. No one wants to be proven to be a fool for his following an impetuous lunatic.

5. Associate the teacher with other well-known despicable characters. He cannot be teaching the truth if he is associated with unpopular people.

6. Indicate that the teacher is using manipulative tricks to win the audience.

7. Use the old "he's just a carpenter's son whom we all know" technique. He is not a recognized man of letters.

8. Accuse the teacher of the most deliberate of crimes changing the very word of God to prove his point.

9. Accuse the teacher of misapplication of the Scriptures. Perhaps, this is the handiest tool of all in proving that someone is teaching error. The accuser makes this method effective by his own misapplication of Scripture!

10. Paint the teacher into the ugliest picture possible by insinuations, slurs, accusations, catchy expressions, and prejudicial assertions.

In the devices illustrated above, I ignored the whole context of fact and truth which surround Peter's discourse. I made no effort to be thorough, consistent, reasonable, or fair. I was only looking for ways to substantiate my preconceived notions. A skilled teacher can adapt these methods to appeal to either the ignorant and simplistic or the schooled and sophisticated. Smooth speech can make truth seem to be error or error to appear as truth.

Recently, I had a brief conversation with a man whom I had not met before, but, evidently, he had heard of me and was on guard! Very quickly, defensively, and with finality, he explained, "I am very conservative." I am glad that he has convictions, but what was he saying? He was protecting himself by letting me know that any new thought that I might present would be judged by his preconceived notions. His critical machinery would be thrown into automatic against anything that I might introduce which would be different from what he already believed. He would be looking for my errors, not my truths. By my repeating and reinforcing his accepted views, we could have carried on a lengthy, friendly Bible discussion.

All who have taught have faced unfair criticism. But are you ever unfair in your appraisal of the teaching of others? Do you ever employ any of the techniques which I used against Peter and his sermon? Be honest about it! Some of the mechanics of unfair criticism are so much a part of our reactions that we grow unaware that we are using them. Let me challenge you to become aware of these prejudicial devices in your speech so that you may become truly objective in evaluating the message of others.

CHAPTER 12

DID TIMOTHY NEED ADMONITION?

Some of our Biblical characters are so idealized that we suspect nothing less than excellence in their conduct and character. The young evangelist, Timothy, is held in such high esteem generally that any unflattering comment about him would seem next to sacrilege.

When we think about his record, however, we become aware of no heroic deeds or impassioned speeches which distinguish him. No letter of his is preserved. Yes, he was a true disciple of Jesus and a devoted companion of Paul. Paul loved him and remembered his tears. I like to imagine that Paul, as he was regaining consciousness after his stoning at Lystra, looked up into the faces of disciples and into the tear-filled eyes of an older teenage boy. He could never forget that. A strong tie developed, but it seems that the claim to fame of Timothy was due more to the love and acceptance that Paul showed than to any meritorious actions of Timothy.

In the two letters that Paul wrote to Timothy, we see loving expressions such as “my true child in the faith,” “my beloved child,” and “I thank God when I remember you in my prayers. As I remember your tears, I long night and day to see you, that I may be filled with joy. I am reminded of your sincere faith, etc. “Yet there is little in the letters that could really be called praise or commendation for Timothy and his ministry. When we look with this in mind, we can readily believe that some of Paul’s words go beyond exhortation into admonition with needling effect.

As he read Paul’s numerous warnings about erroneous teachings in Ephesus, Timothy could have reacted with, “Why is he lecturing me about these teachings? He knows that I know about them and have been opposing them all the time I have been here.” And he might have complained inwardly, “There he goes again telling me all about himself. I have heard him go over every minute detail of his experiences a hundred times in our travels together.”

Paul assured, “If you put these instructions before the brethren, you will be a good minister...” Why did he not rather write, “*Since you are putting...*, you *are* a good minister”? Was he chiding Timothy for reticence in speaking out? Based upon my former notions, I would have expected Paul to laud, “I praise you for commanding and teaching these things. You are allowing no one to despise your youth, but you are setting a wonderful example for the believers in speech, etc. “But rather, Paul makes these into exhortations or admonitions as though they were not being done by Timothy.

Isn’t there a sting in Paul’s next sentences also: “Till I come, attend to the public reading of scripture, to preaching, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophetic utterance when the elders laid their hands upon you. Practice these duties, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your progress. Take heed to yourself and to your teaching; hold to that, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.” In these sentences, Paul is not commending Timothy for his present endeavor in these matters, but he seems to be admonishing him as though he had become apathetic, sluggish, and lax.

As though Timothy were inclined toward conceit, controversy, and riches, Paul warns that he shun all such and aim for higher things. As though he were flagging in faith and zeal, he is admonished to fight the good fight of faith, and he is charged to be unstained and free from reproach as though his conduct were becoming questionable. Was Timothy becoming so careless as to deserve a warning to “guard what has been entrusted to you” and “avoid the godless chatter”? Is it thinkable that Timothy had enrolled in UCLA (University of Cerinthus of Learned Agnostics) to get his degree and learn about Gnosticism first hand, and was becoming too intrigued by some of the Gnostic teachings? Could it be that Timothy was letting the bodily exercise of sports take too much of his time and energy?

Timothy’s growing apathy and retiring nature might have constrained his father in the faith to urge, “I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you...for God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control.” “Do not be ashamed then of testifying to our Lord,” could hint of reticence to confess Christ to his learned friends. “Follow the pattern of sound words” and “guard the truth that has been entrusted to you” are admonitions more likely given to one who has grown careless about teachings and is enticed by novel ideas.

“Think over what I say” concerning being strong, enduring suffering as a soldier, and becoming entangled in civilian pursuits. Was he vacillating in his commitment and selling real estate on the side? “Remember.” “Remind them” “Do your best.” “Avoid.” “Shun youthful passions.” Paul was not commending him for doing these things already.

Again, Paul did not express confidence that Timothy was preaching the word urgently in season and out of season, convincing, rebuking, and exhorting with unfailing patience, being always steady and enduring suffering while doing the work of an evangelist and fulfilling his ministry. Paul gave him a most solemn charge, not to continue his exemplary conduct in these areas, but to do them.

You may be protesting that I am just building a prejudicial case against Timothy. Perhaps so. Even if that is true, you will have to admit that Paul was rather stingy with his praise and commendation. If he was warning as an overprotective parent to his son, we must admit that the middle-aged Timothy could easily interpret much of it as parental nagging. You may now wish to re-read both letters with these things in mind.

Is this just an effort to debunk a hero? No. Timothy still holds my admiration. I now think of him as having need of admonition because of human weakness, and that makes the epistles more applicable to my vulnerable character. From the above consideration, we may derive several benefits.

1. We may see the profit in approaching interpretation from other than traditional viewpoints in order to gain richer meanings.
2. We may better comprehend that even Biblical heroes and spiritual giants had human weaknesses which also abound the more in us.

3. We may consider that Paul and Timothy were not so totally infatuated with each other that there were no personal differences between them to be reckoned with. They, too, had to bear and forbear while their mutual love and respect kept them bound together.
4. We may be encouraged to work more effectively today with men who are flawed in their personal attributes by nurturing and cherishing the love that binds us.
5. We learn that loved ones do not confine their comments to praise and extolling our virtues. Ministers today must also know that their conduct will be scrutinized by those dearest to them, and that loving admonitions from such are worth heeding.

CHAPTER 13

JESUS' YOUTH SERMON FOR ADULTS

Through the years, as I searched for material for special lessons for youth, I was perplexed to find that Jesus never addressed any youth group or gave special lessons to children. Evidently, he left the teaching of the children to the God-ordained teachers their parents who were in charge of God's youth program.

Jesus did teach adults some very vital things about children and about their relationship with them. In *Matthew* 18:1-14 we can read Jesus' youth sermon for adults. Some of the points of this lesson were not impressed upon me until more recent times.

The disciples asked Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Calling a child to stand before them as an object lesson, he declared, "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." That response is strikingly similar to what Jesus told Nicodemus. A little child is scared to be out on his own, is insecure in handling responsibility, and is lacking in feelings of self-sufficiency. You must remember, Jesus is saying, the time before you began to be so assured of yourself. You must start over, being born again, as it were, regaining that same spirit of dependence instead of an attitude of dominance. Those who are acutely aware of their dependence upon both God and fellowman are not striving for distinctions of rulership and greatness any more than a child is seeking to rule the world.

"Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me." Serving the humblest is serving Jesus himself. With this assurance to motivate us, how can we overlook one needy child in this world who needs our ministering? How insulting against Jesus child desertion must be! How can any man who has left his unclaimed offspring, conceived in lust, to roam the streets of some foreign city as an outcast, starving waif claim God's acceptance when he has rejected Jesus in the person of his own child? While failing to provide for his own, he or any other man, is worse than an infidel.

Those little ones were old enough to believe and to be led into sin, or at least, it is anticipated that they would be. Woe to the person who would lead one child to sin! Especially, in this time of flouted sexual promiscuity, it must be reemphasized that parenthood carries the gravest of responsibilities. Your children would be better without you, Jesus is implying, than for you to practice or condone evil before them, leading them astray. If you were drowned in the sea, perhaps some godly person would take your children and rear them like you should be doing.

"Woe to the man by whom the temptation comes!" There seems to be a conspiracy against the children of this generation to lead them into abandoned living. The pornographers, drug dealers, liquor advertisers, entertainers, musicians, script writers, and actors seem eager enough to deliver our children to Satan for money and notoriety. In so doing, they are selling their own souls into hell by committing crimes against both the children and humanity. They should prefer maiming of their bodies to the punishment awaiting them. Voluntary amputation of a hand or foot cannot

repay for misdirecting a child, but cutting off that greedy, lustful, hedonistic, materialistic, and godless nature which may become the stumbling-block can prevent one from misleading a child.

Don't consider children lightly. God doesn't. His angels are assigned to each child. Since angels are messengers, we can be sure that each case of neglect or abuse of a child is declared to God in whose presence they stand. And because they are ministers serving the welfare of those over whom they watch, for a person to cause a child to sin is to work against the very angels of heaven.

How early in life is the assignment of angels made? If the little ones have the ministering of angels, are those angels watching over the little ones yet in the womb? "See that you do not despise (consider lightly) one of these little ones!" Jesus warns. The abortionist looks down on the child with contempt, regarding it as worthless or distasteful, but the Son of man came to save it!

Finally, in this text, Jesus related a parable about a sheep that was lost from the other ninety-nine. Surely, I had known it before, but, with stunning impact, I observed more recently that this parable is different from the parable of the lost sheep recorded in *Luke 15*.

Who is that straying sheep? It is a child! It is the little one whom parents or other adults have despised. Angelic interest continues even though human adults may be neglectful. We participate in the greatest ministry conceivable when we join with God, Jesus, and the angels toward the saving of one and all of earth's children.

Jesus' youth sermon for adults is awesome. No person can knock on heaven's gate hopeful of entering who is not giving due consideration to children. Neglect and sinful examples of the past may be beyond remedy or repair, but we can begin where we are today with a renewed commitment and find the grace that both forgives the past and enables for the present.

CHAPTER 14

WHY DIDN'T PAUL REFORM?

Before baptism can be effective, a sinner is called upon to repent. That repentance is a change of mind which determines a course of reformation. We can hardly expect that a person deeply entrenched in sin would be able to recognize each of his sins and make a complete break from them on short notice, but, given a number of years for maturing, we would think that reformation should be accomplished.

We consider Paul as having been a spiritual giant of the most saintly character, yet toward the end of his career as a preacher he admitted to being the chief, or foremost, of sinners. Isn't that disappointing? Why didn't Paul reform?

Perhaps you are thinking that Paul didn't really mean that he was such a sinner but that he was just exaggerating for the sake of emphasis. That could be true; however, I think that there is a richer meaning for us to grasp. I am suggesting that Paul shows a development of his understanding of the nature of man, of justification, and of grace. His being Spirit-filled did not rule out his need for maturing in understanding.

Paul could not forget his past. The painful memory of his violence and blasphemy against Jesus and his disciples eroded his pride, which was based upon his claim of righteousness as a Pharisee boasting of flawless law keeping. Pride does not die easily, but we see his diminish consistently through three statements of confession.

In one of his earliest epistles, he admitted, "For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain"(1 Cor. 15:9f). Here he compares himself with the other apostles in their honorable and distinctive role. Later, in his letter to the Ephesians, he compares himself with the other disciples rather than the apostles: "To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given" (Eph. 3:8). More time passes and Paul makes another comparison, not with the apostles or the saints, but with the vilest of sinners: "I am the foremost of sinners," he confesses, "but I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience for an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life" (1 Tim. 1:15f).

Paul did not say "I *was* the chief of sinners" but "*I am!*" Why hadn't Paul reformed? We know that Paul had changed from his former ways and he was not relying on grace as a license to continue in sin, but at this point he better understood the nature of man and justification. Man is a sinner. He has always been a sinner and will always be one. Even though he may grow in sanctification, he cannot escape the fact that he sins. And he has never been able to undo one of his misdeeds. He has no means of self-redemption. As Jesus had taught, even though he might own the whole world, he would hold nothing in his hand with which to buy back, or redeem, his life.

How can man be saved? With man it is impossible, but with God all things are possible. Will God make this sinner into a sinless person? Will he, through some sacramental ritual, pour his grace into a man's soul, thus perfecting him? Is the concept of baptismal regeneration true that, through sacramental powers in baptism, the Spirit recreates the sinner into a sinless person? Does the Spirit work in us to make us into the sinless person that God would have us to be?

We cannot make ourselves sinless, and God does not do it for us. Righteousness is never achieved by our efforts or accomplished in us through God's efforts. Justification is not accomplished righteousness but imputed righteousness. We are sinners accounted as righteous. This is grace, not works of achievement or accomplishment either on our part or on God's part. The greater the sin, the greater the grace. "The grace of our Lord overflowed for me." Grace is deeper than the sin of the foremost of sinners! Paul, the chief of sinners, was chosen that "Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience for an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life." No wonder that Paul concludes this consideration with a doxology: "To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen." (1 Tim. 1:12-17)!

Yes, Paul had long since renounced his impious and vicious acts against Jesus' disciples, but there had been no time in subsequent years when he could say that he was no longer a sinner. Being a sinner is of lifelong continuity. No longer did Paul feel constrained to protect his Pharisaic facade of achieved righteousness. He could openly confess, "I am the chief of sinners!"

Probably, there has never been a more saintly man than Paul, yet he was a sinner of a most infamous nature. This reveals the paradox of justification by grace. God, through Christ, will account a sinner as righteous when he knows that the righteousness can never be accomplished in the person.

CHAPTER 15

CHRISTMAS

Since our hope is built upon the belief that the Word became flesh by means of his birth, it seems incredible that we could possibly ignore the extensive celebration of that event by millions of our believing neighbors during the Christmas season. While others are accelerating their religious activities in remembering Jesus' birth, often we have been known to launch a month-long campaign against increased attention to his birth during December lest others might think that we are observing Christmas.

In many cases, the disclaimer is made that we do not observe Christmas as a religious holiday, but then we sing songs about his birth, and the preacher reviews the exciting details of his advent. Some choose greeting cards that wish a happy holiday season for their friends but dare not wish them a merry Christmas or even express any spiritual message. We find ourselves in a very inconsistent situation of enjoying the Christmas holidays just like everyone else while declaring that we should keep Christ out of Christmas. What place may, or should, we give to Christmas? A detailed discussion of the subject would require too much space, but a concise one may be beneficial. So, let us review some facts relating to it.

1. THE ORIGINS. Of course, the facts from which traditional Christmas has developed are in the Bible. The beautiful drama concerning Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zachariah, Anna, Simeon, the shepherds, Bethlehem, the manger, and the Wise Men is preserved by the Spirit in the Gospels. God wanted us to know about and appreciate this happening of everlasting significance.

The church of the early centuries began to have a mass in veneration of the infant Jesus. Thus, the name *Christmas* developed from *Christ's Mass*.

The Romans, as well as pagans universally, worshipped the sun as a god, known by such names as Sin, Re, Sol, Apollo, Helios, Mithra, Mazda, and Elagabel. The birthday of the sungod was thought to be after the winter solstice, December 21, the day of the least sunlight and the rebirth of light, as it were. As Christianity swept the Roman Empire, rather than erasing all pagan concepts, it adapted many of them by giving them Christian meanings.

Jesus took the place of the sungod: so, the special day of worship to Jesus became Sunday. The orb of the sun became his halo and the supposed birthday was given to Jesus. It must be noted, however, that Jesus was not born in I A.D. and we have no information concerning the month of his birth. In the Seventh Century, the Roman calendar was adjusted to reckon from the birth of Jesus using the calculations of a monk named Dionysius. It is generally agreed that he miscalculated by as much as four to seven years: hence, Jesus was born possibly in 74 B.C. The wafer of the communion depicting the body of Jesus as the Host, round like the sun, was, and still is, kept at the altar in the monstrance with its sunburst design. Holly and mistletoe were sacred to the sungod.

Notice the crescent above Mary's head in sacred art, and you are reminded that she was given the second place of prominence, that of the moongod. The day of the moongod is Monday (Moonday).

2. CHRISTMAS AS IT IS. Whether we approve of it in its current state or not, Christmas is a part of our cultural heritage which is no more likely to go away than football or the celebration of New Year's Day. Some give much favorable attention to Christ through worship, music, and drama, making it strictly a religious observance. To others it is a sort of potpourri of religious and secular traditions and practices such as family reunions, gifts under a lighted tree, and expressions of praise. Perhaps, to most of us it is only a secular holiday growing out of our religious heritage. Having all the elements of a good drama, it becomes little more than a Hollywood production promoting commercialism and greed, employing the elements of faith, good will, and nostalgia to sell goods. This emphasis has become rather sickening.

3. HOLY DAYS. There are no holy days. Or, how are they profaned if they are holy? It is common for those who cry out against giving religious significance to Christmas and Easter to consider Sunday as a holy day. That is due to legalistic concepts through which a person thinks to be righteous by the keeping of days and rituals.

God came to hate the very observances that he had previously specified when his people were seeking to be justified by observing them instead of being righteous in heart (Isa. 1:1417). Paul spoke out against the observance of days, months, seasons, and years (Gal. 4: 11) when the Galatians were seeking justification through them. Many among us have developed the same legalistic dependence on attending all services on Sunday.

Paul, however, in Romans 14:56, puts observance of days in the realm of indifference. He explains, "One man esteems one day as better than another, while another man esteems all days alike. Let everyone be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord." Notice that this observance was in honor of the Lord, not to receive justification. Both Paul and Judean disciples kept Jewish rituals of the Law of Moses as religious exercises and observances (Acts 21:1 7f). However, they did not perform those rituals for justification, else they would have fallen from grace by efforts to be saved by keeping the law (Gal. 5:4). To honor God and to teach and edify others by celebrations of the birth and resurrection of Jesus violates no spiritual principle and has much to commend it.

4. PROGRAMS OF SPECIAL EMPHASIS. The contention is made that we should teach about, and remember, Jesus' birth and resurrection at all times rather than at special seasons. If it is meant, "rather than *only* at special seasons," we will all agree, but no one proposes that. Evangelism is to be carried on constantly "in season, out of season," yet no one objects to having special evangelistic campaigns. What is the difference in principle? Teachers should be trained constantly, but we have special, concentrated teacher training workshops. We should worship at all times, but we have special gatherings in which we worship also. Our responsibility to give regularly does not keep us from having special fund raising drives to build buildings or even to meet the budget. Surely, no one can be consistent at all times in all things, but let's make a try for it! And let's master it before we condemn others.

5. ORIGINAL MEANINGS AND CURRENT USAGE. Are we embracing paganism and erroneous religion when we accept anything about Christmas which came from those backgrounds? We must judge by current meanings instead of original meanings, for they change with time and usage. In general usage today, Christmas does not mean Christ's Mass; Sunday is not the day of the sun-god; Monday does not refer to the moon-god's day; a holiday is not a holy day; good-bye does not mean God be with you; Corpus Christi does not refer to the body of Christ; San Antonio is not associated with Saint Anthony; Hallowe'en parties have nothing to do with a holy evening; to mention Pope John Paul does not indicate that he is our father; holly and mistletoe have no religious connotation; we are not referring to Saint Nicholas when we speak of Santa Claus; Christmas participation is not to observe a Catholic holy day; carols are not sung in veneration of the infant Jesus; our handshake is no longer to demonstrate that we have no weapon in our hand; and the burning of candles and decorative lights is not to encourage the dying sun toward rebirth at the winter solstice.

6. SANTA CLAUS. In the polytheism of the Roman Empire, there were patron gods to be appeased or implored concerning various specific areas of life and need. For example, there was Mars, the god of war; Venus was the goddess of love; and Neptune was goddess of the sea. In Christianizing paganism and the paganizing of Christianity, the patron gods were replaced by patron saints. As an example, Saint Jude is the patron saint of hopeless cases, to be implored in cases of despair.

Nicholas was a bishop of the Fourth Century who was especially kind to widows and children. His example of giving inspired others to follow his example after his death. In time, he was canonized and given the feast day of December 6. Saint Nicholas came to be a sort of unofficial, fictional patron saint of Christmas, and his name evolved into its present pronunciation of Santa Claus. Clement Moore, in "The Night Before Christmas," gave us the fictional concept of his appearance, the red garb looking back to the red robes of the Catholic bishop.

Is it a matter of dishonesty with our children to go along with the matter of Santa Claus? As they grow older, will their disillusionment bring about distrust? Does it become a sin?

Some answer affirmatively to all these questions. Their sincerity is appreciated; however, misdirected sincerity breeds fanaticism.

Do we feel compelled to explain to our children that the Incredible Hulk is a deception, that the Flintstones are a hoax; that there is no such thing as a bionic woman, or that the tooth under the pillow really does not turn into a coin? At the proper age most children come to realize that these are in the world of make-believe. They enjoy them that way.

If your child has a problem in distinguishing between fantasy and realism, then explain that Santa Claus is a story book character like the Saturday morning cartoons on television. That won't spoil all the fun. If your child asks skeptical questions about any fictional character, by all means it should be explained that it is an imaginary character.

Even the inspired writers of the Scriptures employ fictional characters in parable and symbolism as though they were real. Piety is much better when it flows from a balanced perspective.

7. IN DEFENSE OF CHRISTMAS. Christmas is very much a part of our culture. Shall we seek to erase it? In protesting the religious emphasis centered about the alleged birth date of Jesus, many disciples have been crusading to “keep Christ out of Christmas.” And their crusade, along with other humanistic factors, is becoming quite effective, for Christmas is becoming increasingly secular. Religious sentiment in the songs of Christmas is being heard less. “Santa Claus is coming to town” is replacing “Joy to the world, the Lord is come!”

I regret this change because we are losing something. Something is better than nothing. Secularism is nothing.

The acclaim given to Jesus throughout the world at Christmas is a great testimony toward creating faith. A Jewish lady admitted to me, “I almost believe in Jesus. The thing that brings me to this admission is the great significance given to Christmas. It must be based upon some truth.” The faith of our children may be reinforced as much by our society at Christmas as it is in Bible classes. Shall we silence that testimony, or should we not be wise enough to make the best use of it?

Our public schools have been neutralized from being of any moral or spiritual help to our society. This has not been accomplished altogether by the humanists. The jealous sectarian criticism of anything promoted in schools relating to the Bible and spiritual expression has been responsible. True, we could not expect the public schools to instruct and support religion unerringly, but was not something better than nothing? Now it is nothing.

We would have a terrible world and an uncultivated field to work if our own little group were the only ones promoting Christianity. The teachings of all groups have not met scriptural ideals, but their teaching is better than nothing.

So, let us not seek to nullify all Christian influence that falls short of our expectations. Instead of trying to secularize Christmas, let us join in helping to make it a positive, faith-building testimony and determine to build on the faith that the Christmas emphasis nurtures in others. Secularism is nothing; let us build upon the something before it vanishes.

8. THE SONGS OF CHRISTMAS. Beautiful music, some festive and some sacred, brings hallowed visions before us at this season. As we go about our affairs with ears subconsciously attuned to this music, our thoughts begin to recall home and loved ones and friends and happy gatherings. A feeling of awe drifts through our minds as we think of the night when God’s Gift to man came and what his coming means to us. What a dark night this world would be without him!

It is touching music. Stop and listen. It preaches sermons with penetrating power. True, like some sermons, some of it is too loud and is forced upon the ear. But some of it can still the soul like the quietness of Bethlehem’s sleepy night. Through song we share the thrill of joyful angels as they proclaim God’s incarnation to an unsuspecting world. Listen to those messengers of the gospel.

The good news brings happiness to man. It is the good news of God's love. We share that love. Love is in sharing. The traditional Santa Claus gives romance to sharing. Is money wasted on gifts? Hardly, if they are love gifts. God gives above our needs to show abundance of love. So do men.

May both the festive and the quiet songs of Christmas fill your soul.

CHAPTER 16

LET THE UNMARRIED MARRY

“Dear Paul; In the new relationship into which you have led us women, we readily repudiate the local religion served by prostitute priestesses in the temple of Venus. We recognize the degrading nature of such sexual experiences for both women and men, but how are we to look upon marriage and conjugality now? May we continue in these relationships while belonging to Christ?”

Some such questions were asked the apostle by the Corinthians. If we had the exact questions, we might better understand his answers. I propose the above questions in view of Paul’s preface to his answers, that preface being in I Corinthians 6. Commonly, a gap is left between the sixth and seventh chapters, but let us consider the possibility that Paul is laying some ground work in the sixth chapter for his answers in the seventh.

In verse 9, Paul lists sexual sins with idolatry, no doubt, because they were very much a part of the religion in their community with their temple supported by a thousand prostitute priestesses. Although some Corinthians might have argued that God made both our passionate sexual nature and also the means of satisfying it, hence “all things are lawful,” Paul countered that “The body is not meant for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.” They were now members of Christ who must not make themselves members of a prostitute, lest they become one with her and the temple that sponsored her. They had become one with Christ. Never could the Christian female be a priestess of their temple nor could the male become joined with the prostitute and what her temple represented for they themselves had become temples — temples in which the Spirit of God lives. To become one with a prostitute would be a sin against one’s own body which had become a temple of God.

Could sexual expression have any place in these new temples? Yes, for God intended that each should have a conjugal partner. One partner was not to refuse the other on the grounds that he or she was now joined to Christ and could not rightly become joined to another person.

The unmarried, having no rightful sexual fulfillment, tend to be aflame with passion. God recognizes this, and he does not deny any person the right of a companion. So, Paul says that the unmarried may marry. But who are these unmarried ones? There are three kinds: (1) those who have never been married, (2) widows, and (3) divorced persons (Compare the use of *agamos*, unmarried/single, in 7:811). Now, wait a minute, Paul! You don’t mean that divorced people may remarry; you must mean “let them marry, except for the divorced!” Paul makes no exceptions. Let the unmarried marry.

Do not verses 1011 deny what I have just written about verses 89? No. We must go back to the context and the questions that were asked. This convert to Christ feels that, since she is joined to Christ as one with him, even as a sexual partner in a symbolic sense, she cannot be joined conjugally with her husband also. She feels strongly that she should refuse him sexually or even separate from him. Paul discourages that but, if she should separate on that grounds, she must

not use it as a pious excuse to rid herself of her husband in order to take another. To prove her sincerity of purpose she must remain single or be reconciled to her husband.

Paul's instructions here are not concerning failed marriages, abused partners, desertions, or the tragic mistakes of young people in which cases the unity of marriage is already destroyed except for the legal divorcement. The destroying of the union of two whom God joined together is the sin, not the remarriage.

Paul assured them of the sanctity of their marriages even though they might be joined to unbelievers. Sexual relations with a spouse were not immoral or idolatrous even though the spouse might be a pagan. If the unbelieving partner, in retaliation to the companion's acceptance of Christ, chose to separate from the Christian, the brother or sister was not bound. That would put such a disciple back into the unmarried state covered in verses 89 where he or she would be free to marry again.

In this teaching, Paul does not call upon anyone to divorce a mate. They were to remain in the state in which they were called. They did not have to try to change their circumcised/uncircumcised, slave/free, or married/unmarried state in order to be joined with Christ as a temple of the Spirit. "So, brethren, in whatever state each was called, there let him remain with God." None were "living in adultery." To our surprise, Paul does not even mention adultery in his teaching about marriage and divorce in this context.

In verses 2728 Paul further advises: "Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you should marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she has not sinned" (NASV). Paul, you really can't be saying that, can you?

We miss the impact of that passage because of preset ideas and vague translations. The word that Paul uses is not free, but the Greek *luo* which Vine defines as to loose, unbind, release. In order for a man to be loosed, unbound, or released from a wife, he must necessarily have been bound to one previously and then loosed by divorce or her death.

This passage is expressed clearly in the NEB: "Are you bound in marriage? Do not seek a dissolution. Has your marriage been dissolved? Do not seek a wife. If, however, you do marry, there is nothing wrong with it; and if a virgin marries, she has done no wrong." The virgin cannot be the "loosed" person to whom Paul refers. Marriages are dissolved by death and divorce. Paul makes no distinction here in granting the privilege of marriage.

Jesus' teachings about marriage, divorce, and remarriage were explanations of the regulations of the Law of Moses. Although the apostolic teachings on the subject might seem to be at odds with those of Jesus, that is not really true. A discussion of this would take much more time and space. I purloined some of my thoughts from tapes of classes taught by Oliver Howard in the Pepperdine Lectures in 1986. For a fuller discussion of Jesus' teachings I would have to plagiarize too evidently; so, I refer you to that source for many challenging and exciting concepts on the subject.

CHAPTER 17

A DIALECT OF DIVISION

Do you speak in a dialect? Probably, very few of us would answer in the affirmative. The language of each person seems to him or her to be the standard vernacular; all who differ speak in a dialect. Because of isolation from others, a people may think very sincerely that they speak the pure language when, in fact, they have developed their distinctive dialect. As that was true while I was growing up, your pond was our tank; others cooked beans in a stewer, but we used a steer; others cooked by a recipe while we followed a receipt, and we used a monkey ranch to adjust the plow. To us, that was the pure English!

There is a pure speech which fosters the unity of God's people, but when a group isolates itself from all others who seek to serve Christ, a dialect of division begins to develop into a sort of argot language. Being brought up in a very exclusivistic Church of Christ, I spoke the dialect of division. Some of it was unintentional, yet much of it was an intentional effort to distinguish the Church of Christ from other denominations. Some of it was veiled language to make our stance less perceptible and offensive to the outsider, but it was a jargon understood by the insider. Many of our expressions employed good terminology but were given a nuance that the indoctrinated would understand as exclusivistic.

Since I have renounced sectarianism and no longer seek to isolate myself from other disciples, I have come to realize how shocking some of my religious language was. Perhaps, you are already aware of the sectarian terminology that I shall review here. I hope so. I shall use we to make my points though I seek to eliminate divisive terminology from my speech.

In the bulletin of the Anytown Church of Christ, you may read some such declaration as this: "The church of Christ is a fellowship of Christians endeavoring to restore the New Testament church. The Lord's church is the brotherhood of all believers. As there is only one true church, it is free from sectarian divisions." That is a nice, solid statement, isn't it? The whole world should be impressed with the unity that we promote!

What is meant by "the church of Christ?" First, it is the church of Christ, and that is us — our segment of the church. Then we mentally equate the church of Christ with the Church of Christ. When we mention the church of Christ, there is an understood exclusion of all Baptists, Pentecostals, and Presbyterians. It is just the Church of Christ. But which Church of Christ? We have a score of them to choose from.

Some groups put church of Christ on their signs and letterheads, seeking to avoid the distinctive proper name Church of Christ. But that makes church of Christ a proper and distinguishing name, and proper nouns should be capitalized. By such evasive language, we are fooling no one but ourselves. And some of us are catching on!

"A fellowship of Christians" — great! But who are these Christians? Only those in the Church of Christ! Not a Baptist in it! Only those in the Church of Christ are Christians, and we are

rather picky about admitting that there are Christians in some divisions of the Church of Christ. This fellowship of Christians is really a fellowship only of those in our particular sect of the Church of Christ. Thus, we use the beautiful word fellowship as a euphemism for sect. The dialect of division. How many times have you heard some pious person affirm, “I was a Baptist for twenty years; then I learned the truth and became a Christian”?

In saying that we are restoring the New Testament church, we are saying that none of the bodies outside the Church of Christ is a restoration of the church. Only that group of which the writer is a part is a restoration. Even other Churches of Christ have missed it. It is a rationale to justify a separate division called the Church of Christ.

What do we mean by New Testament church? It is the one produced by the New Testament, isn't it — the one that the writer is a member of, to the exclusion of all others? The New Testament and the New Testament scriptures are not the same thing. The New Testament (or covenant, or agreement) is not a book of writings. The church is produced when the gospel is believed and obeyed and the Lord adds us by saving us. That is when we accept his new agreement to save us by grace through faith in Christ. The New Testament writings were given many years after the church was formed to guide those who had accepted the new covenant; so, the scriptures do not produce it. All Christian bodies claim to follow the New Testament scriptures, even as the Church of Christ does, but they do not all demonstrate an equal amount of bigotry in extolling their exclusive claims. Besides, the church is never referred to as the New Testament church in the inspired writings.

In our jargon, we commonly refer to the Lord's church as being identical with whatever sect of the church of Christ we are in. Even the glorious word, brotherhood, by the nuance we give it, is made to mean our group, our division, our sect. In speaking of the brotherhood of believers, we, as insiders, know that we are not even counting the martyrs and reformers as having been believers because they were not Church of Christ believers.

When we speak of the one, true church, we are thinking of the body of which we are members. To say that the Church of Christ is the one, true church free from sectarian divisions is preposterous. We have sprouted another “one, true church” just about every decade for more than a century. Such a dialect of division can only develop in a people isolated from the mainstream who listen to themselves for patterns of speech.

Many of us in the Church of Christ admit that all the divisions growing out of the Stone-Campbell Movement are in the Lord's church, except for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). In whatever segment one is in, he usually accepts all on his right, but he rejects all on his left, branding them as “brothers in error,” at best, as though there is some other kind of brothers. There is more acceptance of a group if it is a Church of Christ; but if some other name is used, such as Christian Church, that is a different story. Again, the designation of our sectarian groups is a part of our argot, the language of a clique or closely knit group. Among those of the Stone-Campbell heritage, the various groups are commonly described in derogatory terms as anti-this, anti-that, non-this, non-that, mainline, digressive, instrumental, premillennial, etc. in order to make sure that each sect is distinguished adequately and to conveniently blame them for dividing the church. Each group maintains its own brotherhood and fellowship.

In our jargon, a false teacher is any teacher of error, that error being any doctrine that the denouncer disagrees with. The denouncer is not a false teacher; he teaches no error! Our preachers are not false teachers, but they are faithful, loyal, and sound preachers.

In stirring the congregation to evangelism (mostly proselytizing), we still hear the preacher declare that there are only 300 Christians, for example, in the local community of 20,000 people. Of course, he is excluding all who are not of his persuasion. "There is not a single church in that great city of half a million lost souls," means that there is no church of our distinction. "The gospel has never been taken into that city" means that no Church of Christ preacher has ventured there. There may be countless Bibles there and other Christian groups who beat us there.

Where The Saints Meet is an address directory published by Firm Foundation in 1984. In order to include all the meeting places of the saints throughout the world, the book must be of tremendous size, mustn't it? What a gigantic task to gather all that information! But don't get too excited, yet. It does not include the Catholics, Christian Churches, Baptists, Assemblies of God, or any other than Churches of Christ. In fact, the book only makes the claim that it is "a directory of the congregations of the Churches of Christ." So, very quickly, it identifies the saints that meet as the congregations of the Churches of Christ!

There is another amazing thing about this directory of the one, true church. If you will notice the code by each listing, then refer back to the key to the coding, you will be able to determine which of the sixteen divisions due to doctrinal differences that particular congregation is part of. Sixteen distinguished groups make up the one church and include all the saints. And there you have the sum total, all listed in one paperback of 394 pages, so you will not have to look further for meeting places of the saints.

If I give a different meaning than you do to steer, tank, receipt, and ranch, it is no big deal. I have about as much right to my mother dialect as you do to yours. When I take terms, descriptions, and definitions that apply to Christ's one, universal church and limit their meaning to a small division of that church, then I have committed an inexcusable offense. That is what we have done in our dialect of division.

When I was baptized into Christ, the Lord added me to his one, universal body, which is not a sect, division, or denomination, but includes all who are in Christ. When I limit my fellowship to a group divided from others whom the Lord has added, I become a part of a sect, due to my judgmental, sectarian attitude. When I give this group a name to distinguish it from others in Christ, I make it a denomination.

To name is to denominate; to denominate is to name. When I give limited meaning to good terms in order to justify and maintain my exclusive, sectarian, denominational division of the Lord's body, I develop a dialect of division.

"Thy speech betrayeth thee!"

CHAPTER 18

OUR TRADITIONS

Once I initiated a summer program involving several other churches in our city to help familiarize our young people with their religious neighbors. The youths of these groups gathered at each of these churches on successive weeks to hear the ministers tell about their churches. The rector of the Episcopal Church caught the attention of our youth. In his discourse and response to questions, his standard explanation and justification for almost every practice was: “This is our tradition.” At least, he was honest about it!

Since we in the Church of Christ have always spoken out against following tradition and we have claimed higher authority than tradition, that experience was astonishing to all of us.

I am uncomfortable with such honesty as that minister displayed for it causes me to question my own integrity. So, I began to look into the mirror, as it were, and was surprised and dismayed at what I saw in us.

Instead of speaking of assembling, we traditionally speak of *going to church*. *Ecclesia* means *assembly* but our tradition is to make it mean *church*. In keeping with our custom, *three* assemblies are conducted each week.

We approach our building designated by a sign declaring it to house the “Church of Christ.” While we admit that it could be called “Church of God” or “Church of the Lord” with as much scriptural basis, our tradition makes it necessary to be designated as “*Church of Christ*.”

Although *church-owned property* is not mentioned in the scriptures, our tradition declares such property to be almost essential.

As we enter the building, we are met by *greeters* and *ushers* who direct us to a *pew* in the *auditorium*. We are given an *attendance card* to fill out. A *procession* of the participants alerts us that the service is about to begin. A *song leader* invites us to take a *hymnal* and join in the singing, all of which is *congregational*. These songs are set to music for *four-part harmony* in *shaped notes*.

After *the preacher preaches* to the church stressing the importance of attending *classes* and giving support to *children’s homes* and *preacher training schools*, an *invitation song* is sung.

A couple *comes forward to place membership* in the congregation so they can have their names put on *the church roll* and be under *the authority* of the elders. While *the people watch*, a person is baptized (*backwards*) in the *baptistry* by a man in *rubber waders*.

Now *the Lord’s Supper* is *served* during which *a bit of matzos cracker* is taken by each participant, and then a sip of *unfermented, red grape juice* is taken from a tiny *individual glass*.

As though it were a part of the Lord's Supper, a *collection plate* is passed, as it is done on a *regular basis*.

Toward the conclusion of the activities, an *elder*, whom we do not call a bishop, presents the *budget* and encourages the use of *pledge cards*. At last, the *youth director* leads a *dismissal* prayer and urges everyone to *shake hands* and be friendly.

But we have no traditions! We just follow practices as they are set forth and exemplified in the New Testament scriptures! Really?

The italicized items above are not all wrong as we practice them, and some are rather trivial, but who can deny that they are traditional practices to which we are not necessarily instructed or limited by scriptural authority?

Is it wrong to follow custom or tradition? Let us look at different aspects of this matter.

Jesus was brought up in the culture of Jewish traditions. The Pharisees believed that on Sinai God gave, not only the written law, but the oral teachings also. They maintained that these teachings were preserved in the generations through the elders, their distinguished ancestors from Moses on. Decisions of various judges and interpretations of great rabbis were also considered to be equally binding as the written law. In the Gospels, the "oral law" was called the "traditions of the elders," which were no more than custom made into a code of law. By it they sought to define and clarify uncertainties of the law as a safeguard against violation.

Rather than Jesus having been in conflict with the Pharisees over written law, his point of contention with them was about their following tradition when it rejected or nullified the written law (See Mark 7:113; Matthew 15:120).

Not unlike the Jewish claim, the Catholic concept is that tradition is the teaching of Christ given orally to the apostles and handed down in the church, though not written in the pages of the New Testament scriptures or any other compilation. By this concept, they support their claim that the church (hierarchy) is the living voice of God on earth. This seems to be a convenient means for adding to, or changing, God's directives throughout time. It must draw the same rebuke that Jesus gave to the Pharisees and their traditions.

There are apostolic traditions — a handing down, or passing on, by the apostles. Their messages were handed down from the Spirit. Concerning both written and unwritten tradition, Paul wrote, "I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you" (1 Cor. 11:2). In verse 23, Paul assures the Corinthians, "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you..." Contrary to the general understanding that traditions are unwritten, Paul exhorts, "So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter" (2 Thes. 2:15). The only essential traditions for us are those written by inspired men.

Long practiced social customs become traditional, and uninspired traditions are not necessarily wrong. Jesus kept social customs, and some of them related to religion, like his custom of

attending the synagogue, his receiving the scroll, his standing to read, his returning the scroll, and his sitting to comment on what he had read. Jesus did not denounce the washing of feet, fasting, or the kiss of greeting as being evil due to their traditional acceptance.

Following tradition is wrong when a customary practice is bound, such as our allowing no variation from congregational singing, prohibiting the use of wine in the Lord's Supper, demanding that we wear the designation "Church of Christ," outlawing any but the King James Version of the Bible, or making contribution to the church budget essential. These, and other such practices, may be interpretative safeguards against participation in activities which the collective disciples consider doubtful or wrong. By binding these "safe" activities, however, the church, even while disclaiming church authority, imposes church authority.

Even though we must admit to following traditions, ours are not as bad as those of other churches! Other people even have special programs during the Christmas holidays and make much to do about Jesus' resurrection in the Easter season! They dedicate babies. In order to hide the participant and let the message be emphasized, the ministers and choir wear robes. Instead of having someone read the Scriptures, others will involve all in responsive readings. They meet in sanctuaries when everyone surely knows that they are auditoriums, and they decorate these with Christian art, stained glass, and crosses. Others may have a female song leader, which song leader, though unmentioned in scripture, surely must be a male. Also some have pastors instead of ministers, and they witness while we do personal evangelism. Avoiding our traditional name, "Church of Christ", some wear other scriptural descriptions such as "Christian Church" and "Church of God."

To be honest, we must judge our traditional practices by the same rule that we apply to others. Those pointed out in the paragraph above are no worse than our own familiar ones. Others just don't know how to say "Shibboleth"! No tradition may be bound as essential, except those given by the Spirit.

Heritage — and tradition is a part of heritage — enriches our lives by giving us identity, giving us a common bond, and distilling the wisdom of the past for us. Although that is a desirable feature of heritage, it can also be its dangerous aspect. Do our heritage and tradition give us a common identity with, and bind us closer to, all of God's children, or just to a sectarian group of them? Do they reflect the wisdom of the ages or that of sectarian heroes? Sadly, the tribes are still identified by their "Shibboleth" and "Sibboleth" (Judges 12).

Accumulation of sediment over a period of time made our baptistry look dingy and unappealing. By an application of acid, the crud was removed to reveal beautiful color and freshness. In like manner, the acid of challenge applied to traditional concepts is necessary to restore freshness of meaning long lost, dimmed, or perverted by tradition.

Change for the sake of change is not always profitable, but the harder a custom is to change, the more reason there is to challenge it.

Ponder this insight of Jeroslav Pelikan: "Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."

CHAPTER 19

ADDING OUR SAFEGUARDS

In eagerness to prevent violation of God's law, men have been inclined to add safeguards to it. These attempts to reinforce God's laws actually reflect on the wisdom of God for omitting the safeguards in the first place. This aptitude for building fences around the law showed early and stayed late.

To Adam God said, "You shall not eat." Evidently, Adam passed this word on to his later formed wife. When Eve was questioned by the serpent, she stated that they were neither to eat nor to touch it. The prohibition against touching evidently was a safeguard added to God's law. When their addition took the weight of law, according to a Jewish story, the serpent seized upon it and, shoving her into the tree, he caused Eve to touch the fruit. By showing her that no ill effect came from touching it, she was convinced easily that no harm would come from eating. Man's "safe course" became a snare. This unfounded story raises a good point.

Where God urges us to be temperate in all things, we have been heard to add, "Don't even touch some of these things." As a safeguard against looking with lust, we are warned against looking with desire. Though holy men "became all things to all men," we are cautioned to "take the safe course" and live in a Pharisaic island of aloofness. To trust others to add self control is too risky; so we advise forsaking all that "could lead to sin," as though that were possible. Rather than exercising Christian liberty with a sympathetic eye for the weak, we demand a surrender of the liberty. Since God exhorts us not to forsake our assembling, we brace it up by adding, "Don't ever miss one." To make certain that we give according to our prosperity, we make it a duty to give at least a tithe.

In these points of illustration, we are adding safeguards to God's law, building fences around the law to make it even more restrictive. We affect a deeper piety than the Savior who turned water into wine and feign a purity more sublime than that of the groom at the wedding feast who had looked upon a woman with desire before he married her.

We imply that Jesus was an accessory to sin in his first miracle and that he was indiscreet in attending the party where his image might be tarnished by the social drinking there. Our mildest implied indictment against Jesus is that he did not "shun the appearance of evil." He simply was not taking our "safe course." And, though he "left us an example," we ought not to walk in this one!

When we add our strictures to what we think to be God's law, we constrict the gate and discourage others from entering. Our added safeguards make Christianity impractical, for who can observe all of our safety regulations? By our safeguards we add a yoke to the legal yoke, and it does not make it any easier. When the weak violate these, like Eve in the story, they are demoralized toward keeping God's real law.

Before adding our restrictions to those of God, we should lend an ear to Jesus' reprimand, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because you shut the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither enter yourselves, nor allow those who would enter to go in" (Matt. 23:1-3).

The Pharisees bound their safeguards with sincerity equal to ours. They got a head start, but we are in the race!

CHAPTER 20

ACCORDING TO THE PATTERN

In time, the original plea of the Stone-Campbell movement to restore the unity of the church was directed toward the restoration of the church itself. We have sought to restore an organic structure identifiable by a pattern found in the New Testament writings.

Being Biblical in our teachings, we often quoted our proof-text for patternism: “See that you make everything according to the pattern which was shown you in the mountain” (Heb. 8:5). When we observe this passage in its context, however, our misapplication of it becomes evident, and this mistaken scent has sent us searching on the wrong trail. God was establishing a legal system which included the tabernacle with its detailed rituals. Having given Moses complete instruction, God cautioned that he follow the pattern given in constructing the tabernacle.

Although the tabernacle was a type of the church, we do not fulfill the type of Moses. Jesus did that. The true tent (tabernacle) was built by the Lord. The writer of Hebrews (8:2) informs us that our high priest is a “minister of the sanctuary and the true tent which is set up not by man but by the Lord.”

No blueprint was given to us, and Jesus needed no pattern. How did he build it? The gospel was preached. People believed and obeyed it. The Lord saved those people, making such a part of the sum of the saved, which is his church — his congregation. That had nothing to do with patterns or structures.

We have spoken of the church restoring the pattern of the ancient, gospel plan of salvation; but, the church has done no such thing; the ancient gospel produces the church. Without that gospel there would be no saved/church.

On Pentecost, the church was not identified by name, organization, worship, or purpose. Such things, at best, are only secondary. A “restoration” of those things is no part of restoring the church. The church which the Lord built is a universal, unstructured entity which defies limiting patterns. It is produced by the gospel, not restored by it. We tend to think in terms of structures and programs when we should be thinking of the entity. We build structures, but the Lord builds the church by saving people. He has not commissioned us to build it, either “according to the pattern” or otherwise. I cannot add one person to it.

Jesus did not build an identifiable, patterned structure and then start adding the saved to it. The Lord saved 3,000 people on Pentecost and added them together; he kept adding the saved day by day; and he is still adding them today. This activity has nothing to do with a patterned, corporate group. And the Lord has not called upon us to restore a patterned organization so he can add the saved to it.

Perhaps, you agree that the above is true regarding the church at large, but you may contend that there must be some organizational structure on the congregational level, and that the group must

be identified by its pattern. In response to such a contention, I would say, first of all, that the Lord does not add one to the local congregational group either. He adds us to his body at large when he saves us.

The Unstructured Church

Must we structure congregations according to a pattern? Let us examine the matter. We read of elders and deacons in the church. Are they essential before a group may be identified as a church? Many of our congregations have neither elders nor deacons. Is it sinful to be in such a group? Is the group composed of saved people? Considering that it has not followed an organizational pattern, is it really a church? Would choosing elders and deacons change the identity or spiritual state of the group? Must it be an independent, autonomous group? Then, how do we explain that in the Jerusalem church there were many groups meeting in homes (house to house); yet, we do not read of a plurality of churches in Jerusalem? Surely, the many thousands of disciples in Jerusalem were not of one congregation, but they all composed the church in Jerusalem. Any organizational blueprint is blurred as we look at the Jerusalem church.

The scriptures speak of elders and deacons in the church, but they also speak of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, ministers, deaconesses, and enrolled widows who served. Does the blueprint say that a congregation must have all of these? No? Then, which ones must be included in order to follow the “simple New Testament pattern” of organization and function? And what are the precise functions of each? There is endless debate among us about this “simple pattern” by some of us who do not even know the difference between a minister and a preacher. If this pattern is so easily discernible, why haven’t we, and all the other God-fearing people of the ages, been able to see it? God could have spelled this all out with definitions, laws, and regulations, but he did not see fit to do so. The lack of definitive information seems to place a lack of emphasis on organization and permits the disciples in different circumstances to organize their corporate functions in the manner best suited to their needs. God places no man or structure of men between the disciple and himself. There are no lords or mediating priests.

The church was begun and nurtured by men exercising special spiritual gifts, including the speaking in tongues. Women wore veils while praying and prophesying. Destitute widows were enrolled as special servants. Other women were deaconesses also. Evangelists spread the gospel, while teachers, prophets, and elders taught the saints. Gatherings of the saints were more of a horizontal outreach than vertical. In gatherings, they prayed, sang, communed and enjoyed fellowship meals. The model church held possessions in common, and the only collections that we read of were for the poor and for evangelism. No mention is made of a corporate treasury or of continued, weekly collections. No name was worn to designate the church. Racial discrimination was not tolerated. They laid hands on appointees and on the sick, whom they anointed with oil. They fasted. The kiss of love was enjoined. Jesus gave both an example and a command to wash feet, which thing was a virtue of the worthy widow. Jewish disciples kept rituals of the Law of Moses. There was no command or precedent for church-owned property, weekly communion, orphanages, corporate trustees, paid congregational personnel (except elders), “placing membership,” the class system of teaching, hymnals, or four-part harmony.

As you well know, none of our congregations practice all of those things that the early church practiced, and all of our churches practice some of the things not practiced then. Which of these things are parts of the “simple New Testament pattern?” By which of those marks is the church to be identified today?

Our sincere, constant debate over what the essential pattern consists of has resulted in many divisions. Our emphasis of details of lesser significance has caused us to destroy one of the primary, essential qualities of the church — its oneness, its unity.

No Pattern Given

Where do the scriptures outline an exclusive and inclusive pattern for local organization or of the activities to be carried on when the group meets together? There are instructions and example for the saints to assemble for edification, but no prescribed pattern is given for those meetings which give the details of an agenda. Disciples may assemble to discuss the business and work of the group, to praise and teach in song, to pray, to eat together, to teach the scriptures, to commune, to deliver one of their number to Satan, to mourn and bury their dead, to celebrate a wedding, to select and appoint their elders or deacons, or for any other activity which they consider to be of benefit to the group or individuals. They might assemble for any one of those activities, or for a number of them, at any particular gathering. No specified pattern is set forth for such assemblies, nor are they required on specified days, nor must they be at “the church building.”

Even the teaching and admonishing to be accomplished by psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs is not a part of a blueprint for “worship services,” as we commonly describe our assemblies for edification. These exhortations to sing are given in context with other exhortations toward proper social conduct, rather than in context with “worship services.” The context includes exhortations to husbands, wives, parents, children, and slaves and in “whatever you do, in word or deed.” In their social gatherings, instead of singing the songs of the drinking party under the influence of intoxicating spirits, they were exhorted to be filled with the Spirit and to up-build each other with spiritual songs. If you are inclined to reject this, please read Ephesians 5:6 and Colossians 3:1 again. Be honest with yourself!

Which congregations among us use the Jerusalem church as a pattern? The Jerusalem church selected deacons without elders. We read of elders there later, but not “elders of the churches.” Even though the disciples met in different groups, church is always mentioned in the singular. Then, we have the elders meeting jointly with the apostles to make a decision to be effective far beyond their own congregation or congregations. These elders made decisions for the church in Antioch! In our search for a pattern, we have evaded these points. Let me help you with an evasion!

As Oliver Howard, in a class at the Pepperdine Lectures, points out, these elders in Jerusalem were not the elected type of elder that we read of later. They were elders of the historic Jewish concept as are mentioned in the Gospels. Among the Jews, those who were referred to as elders were the heads of prominent families, men of reputation and influence whom the people respected for leadership in their communities. They were not elected to an authoritative position,

but they only lent their influence through their decisions as leaders. The contribution for the poor was given to them to ensure an honest distribution of it. In the letter to the church in Antioch and among the Gentiles, they were making no authoritative decree, but they were saying in effect: “We, as reputable leaders among the Jews who have accepted Christ, approve of this declaration that circumcision and the Law of Moses cannot be bound as a condition of salvation.”

Surely, we must look to the New Testament writings for guidance in all that we do, whether it be forming a congregation, a marriage, a business, a labor union, a school, or anything else. The question is: Is there an essential pattern to be followed by which the church is identified? If so, where is the pattern? Must there be a command for each detail? Or, are all historical details and facts of equal value as patterns? Are all of those historical details necessary examples, or are there some unnecessary ones? Are some just incidental? Are we given some sort of jigsaw puzzle of historical details, with some extras thrown in and some blanks to be filled in, that we must piece together correctly under the threat of hell?

Selectivity

Out of all the things which we enumerated earlier that are taught and exemplified in the historical record, we have been very selective in choosing for a pattern. We rule certain ones out on the grounds that they were either special, temporary, or cultural. Other practices which are neither commanded or exemplified are accepted on the grounds of expediency. Since we all take such liberties in our selectivity, we have no right to be critical of others whose method of choosing does not coincide with ours. Those who bind weekly communion, support orphanages, and hire ministers because of expediency have no just ground for condemning those who retain deaconesses and tongues-speaking because of example. Since all follow their sincere understanding in discerning what is right in these matters, it is not fitting that one reject the other.

Patternism is another facet of legalism, a seeking to find holy, sacramental rituals through which we maintain righteousness and an official, mediatorial organization through which we work our righteousness, and by which we are kept in controlled conformity. It encroaches on our individual freedom in serving God. It would make our individual relationship with God dependent upon an organizational relationship. Disciples are parts of the community of believers, but that fellowship is not an organization. Our participation in spiritual activities of a corporate group is for mutual up-building rather than for a high priestly function of the structure through which we approach God.

As I review my teaching in many years of my ministry, I am dismayed to realize the emphasis which I put on following the correct pattern which actually took the focus off of Christ, his grace, and our personal relationship with him. Endless discussion of supposed legal correctness of pattern has dimmed our view of him who saved us from such a yoke of legalistic specifications.

CHAPTER 21

A CREED IN THE DEED

Although lawsuits are proliferating in these times, we are dismayed that churches are becoming defendants in quite a number of them. Formerly, a person would have been ashamed to sue a church, but greed has overcome the sense of shame.

Some of our congregations have been in court, however, before the time of this generation. As Restoration churches went through the torture of division over the use of instrumental music in worship, there were bitter contests as to which group would retain possession of the church property. Some of them resorted to the civil courts to decide the matter.

In reaction to that unpleasant circumstance, congregations began to put restrictive clauses in the deeds to their property. By such a procedure, we non-instrumentalists could claim the property legally, in case there was a dispute about it. Then, as a further safeguard, some congregations added restrictions to the deed concerning other matters of teaching and practice. Even though most of the members might not have known that the restrictions existed, these actually became statements of a binding creed written in the deed. Ironically, as we preachers have denounced creeds and denied having one, some of us were doing so in a building that had a creed in the deed.

It would be very interesting to know how many of our deeds still have those restrictive clauses. If a congregation has owned the same property for a great number of years, there is likelihood that the restrictive clause is there. You may want to check this out just to satisfy your curiosity.

Only about fifteen years ago, property was bought for a new congregation near here. I had nothing to do with the transaction, but it was carried out by dear, sincere people whom I have no desire to offend. A restrictive statement was put in the deed. I was given a copy of it. It is an astounding document and is, perhaps, much more inclusive than most of its kind. Because our people need to be aware that such deeds are still in effect and they need to know about the nature of them, I print it here:

“To have and to hold the aforementioned real estate with all the appurtenances and hereditaments hereunto belonging or any wise appertaining unto the said trustees for the (Name) Church of Christ, its heirs and assigns in fee simple forever.

“Included in the deed and expressly made a part of the conveyance are the purpose and limitations for which the lot hereinbefore described was purposed, to wit: to be used by the said (Name) Church of Christ for as long as the following practices of worship and work by the said (Name) Church of Christ are maintained.

1. The Holy Scriptures shall be taught and accepted as the final, all — sufficient revelation from God to man, and regarded as an infallible rule of faith and practice.

2. Mechanical instruments of music shall never be permitted to be brought on to the premises, for the purpose of being used in worship, or for any other purpose, use or design.
3. No teacher or preacher shall be allowed use of the building, its premises, and grounds for the purpose of advocating any doctrine or practice which conflicts with the teaching and practice of the (Name) Church of Christ as taught in the Bible and as currently held by the elders, trustees, or members responsible for the execution of this deed. Expressly excluded from such use are any and all teachers, preachers and others who hold to any form of liberalism, modernism, or premillennialism, along with all hobby-riders, factionists and divisive persons, who advocate any doctrine or practice in conflict with the teaching and practice now current in said (Name) Church of Christ.

“After such a time the property shall be held in trust for such members only which remain faithful to the purposes for which this conveyance is made, and for no others; and, when there are no others, the property shall revert to the (Neighboring) Church of Christ, now meeting at (address).”

In a church which denounces human creeds, here is a current creed in the deed, to be enforced by civil courts!

Other than seeking to secure the property, this is an effort to make the beliefs and practices of the contracting elders, trustees, and members the unchangeable standard for future generations who may want to use the property. Their successors can change nothing; they can only move out. It would set current teaching and practice in concrete, even though all of the teachings and practices are not defined, and even though there are differing opinions on these matters among the initial contractors. No new concept will be tolerated, for the present group has arrived at the ultimate interpretation and practice!

It is unbelievable that a lawyer would allow such an insertion into a deed. And I cannot conceive of a judge permitting a case based upon such a flimsy legal document being brought into his court.

There are many interesting questions which the court could be called upon to decide. Is an *ä capella* tape played at a wedding instrumental music? Since instruments of music are not to be brought on the premises for any purpose, use or design, must all car radios and cassette players be removed from the automobiles, or is simply turning them off as they enter the grounds sufficient? Could the janitor be ejected for listening to his radio while cleaning the building?

Is a jury capable of determining if a group is following the Bible as the infallible word of God, or if it is true to the creed in the deed? “Your Honor, we want you to throw these liberals out!” Who are the liberals? Those who eat sandwiches in the building? Those ladies who wear slacks to church? Those who approve of women teachers? Those who support children’s homes? Those who use individual communion cups? And will someone define modernism to the jury and identify those unsavory modernists?

And those hobbyriders! Could a court take this seriously? Is the hobbyrider one who emphasizes (more than I like) giving, unity, evangelism, baptism, the second coming of Jesus, marriage and divorce problems, or attendance?

Who is factional and divisive? “Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, this man has most of the congregation believing like he does. They are factional and divisive! They must not be allowed to use the building.”

Inasmuch as the original trustees, elders, and members held differing views, which ones will this creed perpetuate? Restrictive clauses are just another effort to bind beliefs and practices on future generations. They express a lack of confidence on the part of those in charge that their teaching will be effective in keeping the next generation on course.

About twenty-five years ago, the group that I worked with was in the process of purchasing new property. The elders wanted to put a restriction in the deed concerning the use of instrumental music. They delegated me to inform the lawyer of their desires. I learned a valuable lesson about the Lord’s church from that Methodist lawyer. He refused to include such a restriction. He explained that the church is a living thing, and that living things change. He contended that the identity and character of a church is determined by those who compose it, rather than the identity and character of its former members.

To illustrate the validity of the lawyer’s contention, we will suppose that the entire congregation becomes liberal, premillennial, or hobby-riders, or comes to favor the use of instruments. They could continue to claim and use the property, for there would be no element in the church to contest it. The living entity changed. In this changed character, the group could continue to use the property unchallenged, or take legal steps to clear the restriction from the deed.

Many other facets of this matter could be commented upon, but I think that you are able to see the ridiculous nature of such a document without further comment from me.

In concluding, let me state that I offer no objection to the formulation of a general statement of belief by a group. It is not a sin to state our beliefs, but it is definitely out of order to demand conformity to those beliefs by all other disciples. The creed in the deed is a device by which a congregation seeks to protect its property and by which conformity is intended to be reinforced by civil law.

CHAPTER 22

SAMUEL DID NOT KNOW THE LORD!

In my imagination, Bible heroes were all people of imposing stature. I tend to think of Samuel as an imposing, stalwart man with the long shaggy hair of the Nazarite. So, it is difficult for me to think that he was only fifty-two inches tall. That was his height, however. You see, he was not always of formidable stature but was once a boy only fifty-two inches tall.

When we read of Samuel's role in spiritual leadership and his honored place in Biblical history, it is difficult to think that there was ever a time when he did not know the Lord. But there was such a time. His spiritual maturity grew from a mixed soil of spirituality and corruption. Dangerous influences surrounded him while he did not know the Lord.

It was a unique blessing for Samuel to be reared in the house of the Lord in Shiloh (I Sam. 13). In fulfillment of her promise to God, Hannah, his mother, put him in Eli's care as soon as he was weaned. The Lord's house was his home. The priests and Levites were his associates. No doubt, they played with him, teased him, and loved him. His playmates were children of the priests and Levites. The High Priest was as a father to him. He knew the notables of Israel. The Law of Moses was daily conversation, the rituals of worship were daily routine, and the priests' portion of the sacrifices was his daily food. What more totally spiritual surrounding in which to nurture a child could we wish for?

"Samuel was ministering before the Lord, a boy girded with a linen ephod." This growing boy was supplied a new robe each year by his loving mother. How beautiful this scene was. Lent to the Lord! Working for the Lord. Totally dedicated. All who observed the boy performing his duties of service must have looked with admiration.

Samuel was brought up in the system, becoming a participant in it and a supporter of it. He was too young to know of the corruption that surrounded him in the system sponsored in the hallowed house of God. Its priests and ministers performed rituals of worship and kept up the property. They were God's people, the right way, and all who would approach God should come through them and the system. They were God's mediators in the priestly sense. But the system did not lead its prized pupil to know the Lord!

The system could not bring Samuel to know the Lord because the priests themselves did not know him. What an awesome thought! The priests were self-serving, looking with greed at the very sacrifices of the people and taking advantage of their position to satisfy their greed. In flaunting open adultery with the women who served at the tent of meeting, they used the house of God, their holy calling, and their authoritative position as a cover for their corrupt actions. The aged high priest, Eli, had grown too lenient. Generally, we have used him as an example of failure as a father, but he was condemned, not as an indulgent father, but as an inert, inadequate, lenient high priest who should have taken extreme action against the offending priests who, incidentally, were his sons. When the leadership of the system does not know the Lord, then who will know him?

Through this dark picture from history, God cries out to us, as he has to his people in all ages. Samuel's namesake today may be your or my son or grandson. We make sure that Sammy is "brought up in the church." His is a church-centered life: he attends church at all services, worships at church, gives to the church, and works in the church. He is taught to accept the system which he is inheriting, to support it, and to perpetuate it. He is carefully indoctrinated in "Why I Am A Member of The Udenominational Denomination," the reasons and argumentation being those of other people rather than his own. Even if his young mind sees discrepancies and inconsistencies, his objections must be stifled for the sake of the system. At his early age, Sammy is unaware of the divisiveness, exclusiveness, and sectarian spirit. He is taught that a militant attitude expresses loyalty to the church. He grows up learning many Bible facts and the doctrinal arguments upholding the positions advocated by leading preachers and editors, being unaware that he is being tutored for bondage.

It is so nice to see Sammy ministering in the "Lord's house" in his little linen ephod, as it were, looking so scrubbed, sweet, and innocent in his "Sunday clothes." It swells the pride of both the parent and the child, and that can be part of the problem. To gain satisfaction from serving and doing what is right can be a wholesome thing. To cater to pride, however, by filling honorary capacities of public participation does not build spirituality. If we could deflate all of the self-fulfillment, ego expression, status building, and authority posturing from all who participate in next Sunday's service, there might be some long periods of silence. The struggle for power in congregational politics by unspiritual leaders may hide itself behind the facade of service in the Lord's house. Paid personnel must ever ask themselves what part the people's sacrifices (monetary rewards) play in their motivation and in the relevancy of their messages.

Tragically, Sammy may have all this good training to his credit and still not know the Lord. He knows much about the Church of Christ, for his life has been church-centered more than centered upon a personal relationship with Jesus.

A man who came to recognize his misdirection in this area wrote to me concerning his parents: "It concerns me so that their commitment is so obviously to the church rather than to Jesus. I'm uneasy that, after forty years in the church with heavy involvement, they still may not know the Lord in a saving way."

Sammy may know much about Jesus, but that is not equivalent to knowing the Lord. Samuel knew much about God but did not know him well enough to recognize his voice that night when the lamp of God had burned low. After God had spoken to him the second time, it is stated that Samuel did not yet know the Lord; but what a difference that night made! After that experience, his life was open to the presence and direction of God.

So, Sammy must come to know Jesus as his companion, comforter, overseer, guide, healer, provider, and sin bearer. Now his life is Christ-centered and Spirit-led. He has a relationship in Christ in which he is at peace with God and can commune with him constantly. He will have strength supplied to overcome the unspiritual surroundings which he inherited.

Let it be said to the credit of Eli that he did not discourage the boy when God spoke to him, even though Eli would hear tragic news through Samuel. Eli did not put him down, saying, "Forget it;

you are just dreaming. If God were speaking, he would be speaking to me as High Priest instead of a kid like you.” I would that Sammy’s spiritual guides would be as open and supportive when he hears the voice of God with fresh meaning, even though he brings bad news concerning their system.

Although Samuel was brought up in the corrupt system, he was not swallowed up by it. Through God’s help, he overcame it and became a leader in reform — a spiritual giant. Today, Sammy is endangered by the spiritual surroundings in which he was born and reared. Many do not survive. Some become involved in the system and perpetuate it. But, thank God, many others are hearing the voice of God again, overcoming their entrapment, and leading others in spiritual revival. Thanks to our present day Samuels, better days are ahead for spiritual Israel.

CHAPTER 23

RESPONSE FROM OUR READERS

This chapter is not a lesson, but it is a compilation of excerpts from letters that Lea and I have received since publishing *[Free in Christ](#)*. Because I have not asked permission of the writers to quote them, they shall remain anonymous.

While trying to get the book published, I submitted it to several publishers both among the Churches of Christ and other groups. None of them chose to handle it. That is not surprising, for they are in the business to make money rather than to promote change. No doubt, the publishing of my material would hurt their businesses, for their customers are so prejudiced as to boycott those who publish that which does not hold to the party line.

The alternative was to publish *[Free in Christ](#)* ourselves. Evidently, that is what the Lord wanted for he must have seen that Lea and I needed the great encouragement that feedback from the book would hold in store for us. Since all who would get the books must order them from us, that gave a personal contact through which we have received many hundreds of pieces of mail and telephone calls — calls from as far away as South Africa. These communications have been almost totally positive in nature. Readers have been enthusiastic and excited about the message of freedom. Such encouragement has breathed new life of optimism in us when we needed it most. We see long overdue and much needed change working throughout the Church of Christ.

Many of the most excited readers call rather than to write, but here are some excerpts from letters which reveal the need for our message and the joy of discovering it.

A LADY IN PHOENIX: I've just finished reading your book. Thank you so much for a lifetime of searching and learning and for sharing that with me. I've tried my entire life to keep all the rules and was so dead-ended staring at a mean, vindictive God who handed out more rules for "comfort." You've saved my life and my sanity and given me a God who loves me. And I'm so anxious to love, live, and learn for Him. Please send a copy of the book to my sister who long ago gave up on all the rules but has never wanted to give up the Lord (in Louisiana). And my brother, who is so tenderhearted and sensitive to all he knows. He has struggled so with the rules and his compassion (in Texas).

HOUSTON: I am giving these books to people who need help in breaking away from the legalism that has caused me a great amount of mental turmoil for many years.

VENTURA, CALIFORNIA: Thank you for being courageous enough to write that book. I feel that a burden has been lifted from me and I can love people that I was afraid of before because of differences in the method of worship or interpretation of the Bible. I am more hopeful now for humanity and the cause of Christ.

A DALLAS SUBURB: Words cannot express what your two books have meant to me and my wife. The joy of freedom in Christ is so wonderful. Worship services have taken on new and

beautiful meanings to me. Our minister has really grown since reading your books. Also, many members have been exposed to your ideas through gifts of the book.

TEXARKANA, TEXAS: I struggled for many years with the “Am I doing enough?” syndrome. Thank you so much for reminding me of the wonderful freedom that I have in Christ.

A WELLKNOWN AND VERY INFLUENTIAL BROTHER: “I have just read your book, [*Free in Christ*](#). In fact, I’ve just completed it for the second time. It has blessed me immeasurably. It has made me stretch a lot. It has caused me to think and struggle. I have reached many of the same conclusions through my own study and the benefit of input of others over a period of years, but some of it is new thought to me. It will cause me to continue to think and study. It caused me deep pain at some points because of my own “lover’s quarrel.” And some of it has caused me to rejoice immensely. Thank you for helping me, and I promise to study. Please send me five additional copies. God bless you for this powerful and important ministry.

ARKADELPHIA, ARKANSAS: The books got us really excited because we have been depressed about our church and Christianity. Our services are so negative and narrow. It has been a struggle to attend services at times.

LOS ALAMOS, NEW MEXICO: I want to tell you how much I enjoyed your book. I stayed up late and read it the last two nights. Having experienced the diverse religious backgrounds of Catholicism and Church of Christ in my own home as a child, I appreciated your attempts to make us all think a bit about the nitpicking differences between various sects.

DALLAS: Thanks to a dear friend’s request, you sent me a copy of [*Free in Christ*](#). I am devouring it and am anxious to share it with friends here in Dallas who have had a need for a very long time to share your thoughts and realize that they are “not alone.”

HUNTINGTON, PENNSYLVANIA: Please send me two more copies of your book [*Free in Christ*](#). I wanted to reread my copy, but I had given it away. I sincerely appreciate your work; you have caused me to breathe freely again with a new love for Christ. Thank you! I had asked you to send your book to a preacher friend of mine in Ohio, and you did. I asked him what he thought of it. He said that he has so far had thirteen people in the congregation read it. They really enjoyed it!

INDIANAPOLIS: Brother, I want to thank you so much for writing of freedom in Christ. I’ve been a Christian 4½ years now and am currently a youth minister. I’ve read a lot of books but none have affected me like yours! I now have a new outlook on God, Jesus, and my position as a Christian! I want several of our Bible study leaders to read this book. Could you please send me five copies?

MURFREESBORO, TENNESSEE: Your book, [*Free in Christ*](#), offers just what I am looking for: a logical and motivating defense against putrid traditionalism and exclusivism. I have often maintained that you cannot motivate one to love by making him afraid. We are indeed free in Christ and should recognize the extent of it so as not to bind where God has not bound. I, like you, have held a repugnant position for years. Thank God for His forgiveness and mercy. I

thank him for you and your wife and your stand for real truth and freedom, though I imagine you have received a great amount of flack. Hang in there.

GARLAND, TEXAS: What a powerful book! Truly, the Holy Spirit directed your writing. I wish everyone in the church (of Christ) could read it. You are on target throughout the book. Praise God for faithful disciples like you who are willing to listen to the Spirit of God rather than the dogmas of men.

SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO: Because of your courage to speak out (and others like you), I have come to realize that I am not alone and that others have come to the same conclusions I have. Thank you for that encouragement!

HOUSTON, TEXAS: Praise the Lord!!! I cried reading your book, [*Free in Christ*](#).

GOLDEN, COLORADO: It was a refreshing surprise to me to find in printed form many of the ideas which I have held or considered through the years, including twenty years of fulltime pulpit ministry. Like you, I am now “free to speak.”

EAU CLAIRE, WISCONSIN: Thank you for your honesty. I too wish at times that I could be the janitor!” (From a minister)

SHERMAN, TEXAS: Having grown up in the (Name) Church of Christ, I heard the likes of G. C. Brewer, J. P. Sanders, Burton Coffman and many others. My uncle was Cled Wallace. Now comes Cecil Hook telling it like it really is. How refreshing.

FRIONA, TEXAS: Even though I do not go to the Church of Christ, I believe what you say applies to all churches of all denominations.

AKRON, OHIO: Thank you for your ministry, and your honesty with the word. I fear that the time may have arrived that other “movements” will pick up the banner of restoration and carry it to heights we have never dreamed of, leaving us behind. May God wake us up.

TEXAS: A friend of ours has been going through incredible emotional pain. She was “converted” from the Methodist Church twenty years ago. One day she said to me, “All those years of *doctrine* in Bible class are useless in helping me cope with this. You know what is the only thing that’s really helped? Those papers we studied by Cecil Hook. I’m just hanging on to that.”

SEARCY, ARKANSAS: According to Stanley Jaki, a Catholic writer, after the trial of Galileo in the 17th century, “cooler heads began to prevail, and it was found that the foolishness of Copernicus was Biblical after all.” During some fifty years as a member of the church of Christ, I have met many whose thinking is quite like the thinking of the Jesuits when they took off after Galileo. It seems to me that you are one of the “cooler heads” in the brotherhood today.

OCC: I thoroughly enjoyed your book. I am a student at Oklahoma Christian College and, after sitting through a semester of class discussing a voluminous amount of issues in the church, I was

very confused. Your book is helping me answer some questions. The title was an excellent choice, for as I progressed through the book, I began to feel a true sense of freedom.

A PUBLISHER AND RADIO SPEAKER: You are on target. Please send me fifteen copies. I can distribute them easily and I think it will do some good. I know we need to “rethink” here in (city). I appreciate you, and thanks for writing the book and another thanks to those who enabled you to print it and those covering the postage.

DETROIT, MICHIGAN: I recently read [*Free in Christ*](#). I laughed, cried, praised the Lord, got mad, and got over it — all in one afternoon! Right there before my eyes someone questioned a lot of things openly that I questioned secretly and also attacked some of my sacred cows. Praise God for your courage. I have been praying earnestly for answers in my personal life. I believe your book is one of the answers. Please pray for me.

SHREVEPORT, LOUISIANA: Excellent! Concise! Needs repeating again and again! Goes to the *real* heart of the matter! A good reinforcement of values for some; and a new beginning for others! Not since *The Twisted Scriptures, Voices of Concern*, and “The Authority Totem” has a work been so reflective of the things that need to be rethought (in my opinion) throughout the “Brotherhood. “I just had to write you both to compliment you on [*Free in Christ*](#). It covers, quickly, a broad range of the issues I have found to be troublesome over the years. In fact, no other book I have run across better characterizes where my mind has been for the last ten or twelve years. I want to encourage you in the distribution of this book. Again, the thoughts of the book, I think, need to be reemphasized, with judicial timing, throughout the Brotherhood. The message is certainly on track.

PALMETTO, FLORIDA: Thank you for [*Free in Christ*](#). I admit to entertaining the same thoughts for years. But when compiled into one book and read in one setting, it has quite an impact. It’s a big bite! I am chewing it now and expect to digest it in time.

SAN LOUIS OBISPO, CA: We learned about your book at an “Adventures In Christian Living” seminar in San Leandro, CA. It sounds wonderful. I don’t know if you have a limit you send at one time, or to one person, but we’d like enough for our deacons and elders.

RHINELANDER, WISCONSIN: I don’t agree with all your ideas and information but I totally agree that all the divisions we have in the Church of Christ are wrong. In some areas we are as tradition bound as the Jews in the time of Jesus. I pray that your book will cause Christians to love more and work together more and stop all this division.

DALLAS: Thank you for being bold enough to write [*Free in Christ*](#). Praise God for using you in such a courageous way. My wife and I have read it aloud to each other getting more excited with each chapter. The Lord has sent this at a perfect time (isn’t he smart!) in our lives and in the life of our congregation. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Maybe this is an overkill of testimony which takes on too much of the nature of boasting. My problem here has been in selecting such a few of the many delightful responses. Surely, you can

identify with many of these readers whose thoughts we have included. I am thinking that you will find them interesting, else I would not take this precious space for them.

We have no list of donors on whom to call for continued free distribution of books; however, hundreds of gifts from people whom we have never seen, ranging from fifty cents upward, have enabled us to continue to give them away. We accept this as a ministry from the Lord, and we are more eager to spread the message than to make monetary profits, as desirable as that would be, from the sale of the books. We thank God continually for sending these partners and we invite you to become a partner in the ministry also.

Very necessary and appreciated partners also are those who distribute the books, whether they have money to give or not. We depend on others to pass them to those whose hearts the Lord is opening. We invite your partnership in this also for the books do no one any good stored in our garage. A retired minister in Kansas City has distributed 250 copies and a brother in Arlington, Texas has paid for and given away 210 copies. Thank God for those men and many others who have helped. Some kind persons have paid us retail price for books so we could benefit from the added income.

In the thirtytwo months of distribution up to the time of this writing, we have distributed an average of 16.6 copies per day. They have gone into nearly every state with greater numbers going to Texas, California, Tennessee, Missouri, Oklahoma, Arizona, Arkansas, Illinois, New Mexico, Louisiana, Indiana, Wisconsin, Ohio, West Virginia, Idaho, Oregon, Montana, Pennsylvania, and Alaska. They have gone into Nova Scotia, Ontario, Manitoba, British Columbia, South Africa, Zambia, Nigeria, Guatemala, Switzerland, Yugoslavia, Greece, India, Singapore, Brazil, Chile, Columbia, Mexico, England, and Grand Cayman Island. Numerous ministerial students have read them. Many books have gone to both members and ministers of the Christian Church, and of other churches.

This is a ministry involving many people in many places. Lea and I praise God for using us and you in it.

CHAPTER 24

CRIES FROM A TROUBLED CHURCH

Every organization, institution, or endeavor is subjected to criticism from some of the very persons involved in them. We cannot afford to draw conclusions hastily based upon the judgment of objectors. Good food can draw flies just as spoiled food can.

To insulate ourselves against criticism is foolish and arrogant. Sometimes the critics are right! The cries of the concerned may save us from the fate of Challenger and the Titanic.

Too many cries of concern, distress, and desperation are being heard in the Church of Christ to allow us to blithely ignore them. Courageous men among us have cried out for redirection, placing eternal welfare, reputation, and job security on the line. I joined in also, using the pulpit as my forum, but little call for change is allowed from the pulpit by people who already have all the right answers. The pulpit should be a symbol of truth rather than party loyalty. It usually allows only a defense of what is already accepted as truth — those distinctions which made the party. Any proclamation of corrective doctrinal teaching is suppressed to the point that it becomes intolerable to one who has a burning message on his heart.

After leaving the professional pulpit, I put my concerns about our legalistic, oppressive, exclusivistic system on paper, giving positive, liberating solutions. Other concerned people joined to enable me to publish [Free in Christ](#) for free distribution. Immediately, I began to receive excited calls and letters from across our nation from hundreds of others who have been crying out in frustration and desperation.

Read this agonizing cry from a talented preacher of prime age and ability in Tennessee. He verbalizes the hurt of so many who have dedicated their lives to an ideal, only to meet the angel of frustrated conscience in the night of disillusionment, and to wrestle until they are victorious though crippled:

“It is unreasonable to expect to change a system you perpetuate. Even though I give lip-service to reform, I accept a paycheck generated by those who have no real intention of doing so. I became a preacher so that I could proclaim the truth — and yet I dare not. Staff, pavement, roofing, and professional proselytizers all clamor for a piece of the pie that should be given to the hungry. What would Barton or Alexander do? I think I know.

“I cannot continue to promote a system of theology that leaves most bankrupt spiritually. If someone prospers, it is in *spite* of what they are taught, and may God bless them.

“With 30+ potential years left in my sojourn, I MUST find a way out of the professional, locally owned and operated ministry. With God’s help I will NEVER cease to proclaim the good news, but I must confess that I don’t know where or how. Please pray for me in this matter.”

With hurt and tears, a loving, middle-aged Texas brother who could no longer remain in the pulpit at the expense of his liberty to speak writes:

“Cecil, you have challenged my thinking, strengthened my faith, and given me courage. And, all of this when my thinking was troubled, my faith was weak, and I was fearful about expressing my doubts and questions. I once again want very much to share the message of faith and hope with others who, like me, find the constriction of their doubts and fears in our present fellowship unbearable. The freedom, hope, and joy in Christ and our faith in Christ must be allowed to flow to all who are bound into a narrow legalistic trap. We must provide Jesus and not law, so that His bride may truly be one full of the beauty of love for her betrothed.”

A man in New Mexico, known for his writings and many years in the pulpit, being frustrated and defeated in his efforts to replace legalism with grace, love, and unity, expresses what other preachers, both young and old, are feeling and saying. They, too, are leaving the pulpit for more private ministries. You can relate to this:

“One of the saddest things is that our people are so blind and they do not recognize their blindness; they are slaves to those who intimidate and threaten to withdraw from any who study the Bible for themselves. Again, they do not recognize their slavery to a system rather than to Christ. This is not to say our people do not respect and honor Christ; they do. I believe that many of us are in the same position as were the Pharisees.

“In a church or religious group that forces every member, by the threat of excommunication or withdrawal, to conform to established norms and official interpretations, legalists and conformists may find a comfortable haven; but for the Christian with a creative spirit who wishes to study the Scriptures afresh, drawing a conclusion with the help of the Spirit of God and discussions with other Christians of like determination, such an environment is only a little short of hell.”

These three men have spoken what many others are saying and feeling with varying degrees of intensity. In recent months, other preachers have expressed their lack of hope in being able to find a congregation where they can proclaim God’s liberating grace. University students, training for the ministry, are asking despairingly, “When I graduate, where will I find a congregation with which to work that will permit me to teach the truths that I have learned?”

These cries are not the shallow criticisms of malcontents. They are not the barkings of jittery poodles responding to each other’s bark. These are men of dedication who have paid for educational training for a work which will sacrifice salary annually. They have studied and drunk deeply of spiritual wells. Now, they cannot dispense the good news of grace which they have learned except in the old wineskin of legalism. Theirs are not the complainings of the disgruntled, but the cries of a sick and troubled church.

With dismay, a venerable disciple of age and spiritual ripeness, wrote of what happened in his home congregation, a large church with a gifted preacher: “Our elders have just fired our preacher because of his attacks on legalism and his burning messages of grace through faith.” Does that not sound all too familiar?

Many members of the Church of Christ can, in varying degrees, relate to the experiences of this deacon in a sizable church in Tennessee. He began to lead his high school class from legal justification to grace, but “The elders at church, after having talked with me on several occasions, decided to ask me to (1) not teach a class at church, (2) not teach what I discussed with them to any member of our congregation, (3) resign as a deacon, (4) not serve in any capacity in our congregation, and (5) submit to Bible studies with one of them along with the preacher. My family has been torn up and quite upset at the severity of the punishment...”

Another man of the same city lays this indictment: “We have developed an authoritarian institution called ‘the eldership’ which rules the average church with a rod of iron. Most of them cannot teach, but how they handle the money and decide who can and who cannot participate in the church life! I am of the strong opinion that, until this institution is destroyed and a new kind of elder who leads by example and limits himself to teaching and shepherding, the Restoration Movement is doomed.”

Does this Texas woman just have a bad spirit? “I have been suppressed, depressed, and oppressed for over twenty years, but when God began to teach, I too was set free. You are so right; it is painful to know you have hurt others by attacking their faith. God forgive me. For lo, these many years I could not ask others to come to hear what I was hearing.”

From Oklahoma: “I have read your book and all I can say is ‘outstanding!’ Every time I read a page, I kept thinking that my wife and I had experienced most of the nonsense you described in the book and we did not like it while we were part of it. Our life has definitely changed since we moved to (name of church) and began genuine open Bible study. I never say *never*, but we do not ever plan to go back to the legalistic religion we once were a part of.”

A young lady in Illinois puts it bluntly, “I came from a very, very, almost cult-like Church of Christ. I was so burdened with all the ‘rules.’ It was too much and I disliked God very much, yet was so afraid of Him.”

House churches have been the refuge of many, as this man in Ohio tells us about: “I am part of a group which decided that the traditional church was not meeting our needs or being open to change of any kind, let alone acknowledging truth. We started meeting in our homes several years ago and wonderful things started happening. I am impressed especially with the approach to Biblical command which I saw in your book.”

There’s a glimmer of hope for this Texas man: “I am a 41 year old adult who was born and raised in ‘The Church’ and have been frustrated by our legalistic attitudes, and more alarming to me is the frustration I see in my children which I fear may be apathy, which is even worse. For years I have stayed in the Church of Christ hoping to work toward the restoration and freedom you speak of. It is truly a long and slow process, but I’m encouraged that renewal is under way.”

Yes, many are serving Christ now instead of a set of doctrines, and this Texas mother tells of its effects: “I can’t begin to tell you what a profound effect your book, [*Free in Christ*](#), has had on my life and on the lives of some of those around me. For the first time in my twenty-nine years as a baptized believer, I am beginning to feel the power available to me as a child of God. No

longer do I care one whit for whether or not I have dotted all the *i*'s or crossed all the *t*'s. What I care about is whether I have Jesus Christ in my heart and whether or not I commit my life to him daily. This new attitude must be showing somewhat, because all of a sudden, people in grocery stores, bakeries, etc., are talking to me about Jesus. I no longer feel sorry for them because they don't have the 'complete truth.' I just feel blessed that Christ is being glorified."

These heartrending testimonials go on and on. They are from preachers, elders, longtime members, new members, young, and old. Many feel trapped in a system they cannot change. Some try to change it and suffer extreme rejection. All too many have died spiritually and are with us no more. The freedom of house churches has given a breath of life to others. To our great shame, many devout, sweet-spirited disciples have had to abandon their heritage in the Church of Christ and unite with some other group to save both their sanity and souls. These are all victims of an oppressive system which we have developed in the name of the Lord of love and freedom. Our ugly, sectarian, judgmental spirit is choking our life out as we hover the edge of the black hole of decline and extinction.

I know from the calls and letters that I get and from what I am reading that change is working among us. That is cause for optimism. I wish that there would be such widespread openness for change that all could work for redirection and be able to stay with our beloved heritage. Continued rigid resistance to reform will continue to dissolve our members into other less judgmental bodies where Christ and brotherhood are emphasized more than dividing issues.

These cries of anguished people are the cries of a hurting church. To shut our ears against the agonizing cries of a troubled church is foolish, arrogant, and self-destructive.

CHAPTER 25

SHARING WITHOUT FELLOWSHIP

When Freddie Little started visiting our assemblies, we were all happily surprised. For many years he and Sarah, his faithful wife, had gone their separate ways religiously. She was always at our every service, and he was equally active as a Baptist. With increasing frequency, however, he came with Sarah and he soon seemed at ease in participating in our services.

In time, Freddie went beyond a more passive participation in the singing, praying, communion, etc. He would enter into the discussions in classes, say “amen” at the conclusion of prayers, sing the invitation with special earnestness, and invite others to our services. When it was Sarah’s turn to “prepare the communion” (?), he was always right there helping her. Once, when she was ill, he prepared it alone. He helped her with her World Bible School correspondence courses, and he even helped her teach a prospect in their home using filmstrip lessons.

Everybody liked Freddie for he was an inspiration to all of us. But a problem developed with Freddie. Because he had been so much a part of us for so long, many newer members thought that he was a member. It happened at a midweek service: there was a no-show for the dismissal prayer, and the fellow in charge called on Freddie on the spur of the moment. Freddie led an excellent prayer.

Undertone reaction was immediate, though no one wanted to hurt his feelings. The elders were quick to deal with this serious mistake. At their direction, the minister gave a lesson the next Sunday on “Does God Hear A Sinner’s Prayer?” That settled the congregation fairly well, but Freddie was absent that Sunday and did not hear it. So was the deacon who was newly appointed to be in charge of appointments. So, a few weeks later, this deacon appointed Freddie to help serve the Lord’s Supper. There he was, right there in front of everybody Sunday morning! The preacher was put on the spot by this, but he wisely decided not to deal with the problem in his sermon which followed.

Freddie still did not know of the problem he was causing. Feeling so accepted because of those appointments, he “came forward to place membership” (We speak as the Bible speaks!) in the congregation during the invitation song. The preacher and congregation were so relieved to see him come down the aisle. The eager preacher asked him if he wished to be baptized and to become a Christian. Freddie replied that he had already been baptized and had been a Christian for many years. The whispered discussion between the two was so long that it became embarrassing to those assembled. Finally, he explained as apologetically and tactfully as he could to the assembly that, although we love Freddie and want him to continue to come and share in our services, we cannot have fellowship with him in his present state.

Please forgive me for stringing you along, but Freddie and Sarah Little are fictitious characters. Even though the story is fictitious, it deals with some grave and starkly real problems of ours. It reveals a strangely inconsistent fantasy that we have about being able to share without fellowship and of mutual participation without communion. Somehow, we seem to think that having a

person's name on the church roll (Where do the Scriptures speak of one?) puts one in our fellowship, but that sharing/communion/mutual participation in our corporate singing, prayer, communion, and giving is not really fellowship. It is sharing without fellowship!

Our words fellowship and communion are both translated from the same Greek word *koinonia*. This noun means: a sharing in common, partnership, fellowship. Every week there are persons in our assemblies whom we welcome and encourage to participate in our spiritual exercises. They share in common with us; yet we deny that there is fellowship! How can we explain and excuse such a contradiction? If we cannot recognize fellowship with a person, we should not be in fellowship with him or her by mutual participation. To be consistent, we must either accept fellowship with whoever examines himself and has partnership in our activities, or we must examine others and reject from partnership in our activities those whom we judge. There can be no sharing in common without fellowship.

Traditionally, in the Church of Christ, we have practiced "open communion." We invite anyone who wishes to participate in the Lord's Supper. In this participation in the body and blood of Christ, we share the truest experience of communion. We are each sharing in Christ on equal basis, in full partnership. We are one bread, one loaf, one body. Anyone who eats and drinks not giving discernment to the oneness of the body does so unworthily and thus eats and drinks damnation to his soul. For our participation to demonstrate any sentiment of party loyalty or rejection of others in Christ is but to destroy the real purpose and meaning of the communion itself. This mortal defect is widespread among us. If each person is to examine himself as his prerequisite to communion, then we must accept him on his self-examination rather than our judgmental examination of him.

To withhold my own judgment of a fellow-communicant and to commune with him on his own self-examination would cause me to commune/ have fellowship with one who is in error but thinks that he is not. True. But that person, and everyone else, is doing the same thing when they commune with me! I have not yet reached such a state of self-conceit and self-deception as to think that I am totally free from all error. What about you? "I don't know of any error that I believe or practice," you may protest. Neither does the other fellow. You examine yourself and he will examine himself.

Fellowship does not mean approval or sanction. If it should, I truly would be limited in my fellowship, for most of the members of our congregation do things that I disapprove — the judging of others in Christ, for one example! But because others are members of the Church of Christ, wearing the right party label, we feel free to be in fellowship even though those persons are not free from all error.

Why can Freddie Little commune with us but not serve the supper or offer one of the prayers? Is one action fellowship and the other not?

The Scriptures speak neither of a church roll or people being members of the church, yet we have made this the big issue in fellowship. We can enjoy the fellowship of Freddie in our spiritual exercises but not on the roll. To be consistent, we must either accept him as an equal in Christ or exclude him from participation in the singing, communion, etc. I know that we don't want to

face that choice, but we must, if we are to be honest. Freddie cannot share with us without fellowship.

The other fellow's errors are worse than mine; so, I am justified in refusing fellowship, I may rationalize. Such self-righteousness allows one to forget, or ignore, all that Jesus and Paul told us about judging our brother.

Traditionally, we have considered being in the "right church" with doctrinal and practical correctness as the acceptable basis for fellowship, and we have necessarily become judgmental in determining who has met those prerequisites. But the basis of fellowship is the sharing in Christ, and we must accept a person on his or her own profession. If that seems too shaky to you, just remember that you saw few of the persons whom you accept baptized and you don't know their real purposes of heart, yet you accept them on their profession.

"Open membership" is an ugly term among us, but "open communion" is considered praiseworthy! I do not advocate open or closed membership. That puts men as the judges and the church roll at the center of importance. God is the one who adds, or fails to add, members to his body. I do advocate open communion of those whom the Lord has added, for he put us in fellowship in one body. And the only way that I can have reason to believe that a person has been added to the body is by that person's own claim of it.

If I cannot accept one on that basis, then I must exclude him from our communion and from participation in our spiritual activities, for there can be no sharing in these things without fellowship.

CHAPTER 26

I JOINED A CHURCH

One cannot join the Lord's church. When the people on Pentecost were baptized for the remission of sins, the Lord added them to his church. Those people did not have to decide which church to join, for the Lord added them to his one and only church. There was no worry about being made a part of the wrong church. The Lord's church is not a denomination, sect, or division, for following the Bible will not make anyone a member of such. The gospel only makes Christians only, and one must go beyond the Scriptures to make one a sectarian, denominational Christian. By the same procedure through which people are saved, they are added to the one undenominational church of Christ. Those in the Church of Christ have never joined a church, but the Lord added them to it when he saved them. Therefore, we can be sure that we are not sectarian or denominational Christians.

Countless times throughout my years of preaching, I offered my listeners some such explanation as I have given in the preceding paragraph. It seems so true, airtight, appealing, and to be the simple answer to solve the problem of division. This is the only way that we can all be one in the same church. That plea is so simple, understandable, and appealing that even I had moderate success in convincing others that it is God's way.

A person who is logical enough to form the above statement should be logical enough to see its weakness; however, it took me many years to come to recognize the overly simplistic nature of the explanation. If the Lord adds us to the one Church of Christ (or, church of Christ, if you prefer), which is not a sect, division, or denomination, how do we explain the many divisions among the churches of Christ? How does one get into one of the various groups who are dissociated from one another? Did the Lord add me to one of them, all of them, or none of them? When I obeyed the gospel, the Lord added me to his one church which happened to be non-instrumental, amillennial, and non-charismatic, and made use of multiple communion cups, Sunday School, women teachers, and orphanages. I never sought out such a church and did not apply for membership in it. I was just added to it, sort of automatically!

Others obeyed the same gospel and were added by the same Lord to his one church which happened to use one cup and deplore Sunday School and women teachers, a group which dissociated itself from the one I was in. These disciples had taken no steps to join a division any more than I had.

Still others obeyed the same gospel and were added by the same Lord to the same church which happened to use instrumental accompaniment to singing. Those people took no steps to join a sect, but remained in the church the Lord had added them to. Both of the former groups refused fellowship with this instrumental Church of Christ.

Then there were those who obeyed the same gospel and were added by the same Lord to his one church and found themselves to be in the Christian Church instead of the Church of Christ!

They joined nothing and I joined nothing, but we wound up in different dissociating groups. Surely, God moves in mysterious ways, doesn't he?

The truth may reveal that many other persons obeyed the same gospel and found their membership to be in groups with still other names.

We are not questioning that the Lord added all these people to his one church, but somebody joined a sectarian division also. Who was it? "Not I!" we hear from each one involved. While I was a teenager, my grandfather spent one summer with us. His conviction was that we should not divide the assembly into classes. But he would go to class each Sunday, sitting in the adult class. When I questioned him about it, Grandpa explained that he did not go to classes. He just went to the assembly and the other people divided it by going to classes. That's the kind of explanations that we have made to justify our alignment in different exclusive sects of the Lord's church. We are in the one the Lord added us to and it is others who have divided from us! As the cat gave out a loud "yeow," the mother yelled, "Tommy, stop pulling that cat's tail!" "I'm not pulling it, Mother," he protested, "I'm just holding it; he's doing the pulling!" None of us wants to take the blame.

One can join a group without applying for membership, being voted on, or conforming to any formality of recognition. When I was added by the Lord to his one church as a boy, I then joined an exclusive group in the church universal by my presence, participation, and support. No application of membership was made and no formal acceptance by the group was made, but the fact that I had become a part of that church which dissociated itself from other people whom the Lord had added was understood. If I had, as a professing Catholic, come into the group by presence, participation, and support, I would have experienced silent rejection, if not formal rejection. A Catholic could not have joined. But as a baptized believer, my joining was verified by congregational acceptance, "unofficial" as it might have been.

The same procedure prevails in the various divisions of the Lord's church. We join them. Even though it is still true that the Lord adds us to his church when he saves us, he does not add us to one of our sectarian divisions in the Church of Christ. Isn't it time for us to recognize that, to eat our humble pie, and to confess, "I joined the Church of Christ of which I am a member!"?

After you were baptized and added by the Lord to the group that you are in without your joining it, could that group later withdraw fellowship from you? Well, yes! If they disfellowship you, they operate on the understanding that you are a part of that church. Somehow, you got into it, and it is less than the entire body of those added to the church by the Lord.

If you ever moved to another place, very likely you "placed membership" with a church in your new community. That is a ridiculous term, as though membership is something you can put somewhere, a term invented to avoid using the term "join the church." The Scriptures do not even speak of "members of the church." We don't "join the church"; we just "place membership!" By such action after you were baptized, you definitely identified yourself with a church that did not recognize all others in the body of Christ; hence, you joined a sect.

While we are confessing, should we not go ahead and admit that we are aligned with a sect? Any group that refuses to recognize and accept others whom the Lord added to his church, as we have practiced in creating our divisions, is a sect. Who can deny that we meet that definition? And when we give ourselves a distinguishing name, we denominate ourselves. That's a hard admission for an exclusivist to make.

Is there a solution and remedy for this deadly disease? Ideally, we would all be able to agree on all points of doctrine and practice and be one in the most literal sense. That is both improbable and impractical. It has never been and there is little prospect that it will ever be. I question that Jesus had that in mind when he prayed for our unity, for he knew that we are humans rather than angels.

The Scriptural and practical solution is for us to quit judging others in Christ who hold differing views from ours and to accept them as brothers equal before the Lord. No one must compromise his convictions; all do not need to meet in the same congregation; and all do not have to believe and practice in total conformity. But all can love one another, accept each other, and work together in serving our heavenly Father.

Division or sectarianism is not so much the meeting in separate groups as it is a judgmental spirit. Each can have his own convictions of faith between himself and the Lord (Rom. 14:22), but he fails to discern the one body when he judges his brother while continuing to commune (1 Cor. 11:29), and thus he eats and drinks damnation to his soul. In view of our practice, that becomes very frightening.

Some earnest disciples start new groups in an effort to be nonsectarian and nondenominational. I can appreciate that fully. But why start a new group when there are already other nonsectarian, undenominational churches in your community? Why not join one of them? "I do not agree with their doctrine and/ or practices," you reply. Then just how nonsectarian is your group if it refuses fellowship with others who make the same claim that you make? You start another denomination when you start a group which must distinguish itself (denominate itself) from other nonsectarian churches. If nonsectarian, nondenominational churches are truly that, why do they not all unite — including the various Church of Christ groups who make that claim? "Non-denominational" churches become "nondenominational" denominations!

I joined a church. The Lord added me to his church and then I joined a local fragment of the universal church by my identity with it which implied that I was part of it. The Church of Christ with which I presently associate would be generally characterized as judgmental, exclusivistic, and sectarian in spirit, and many who compose it hold convictions different from mine. While being a part of that group, I disavow what I consider as error; I cultivate an accepting, nonsectarian spirit, and I seek diligently to correct those evils which make the local group sectarian and denominational. I do not know what course I, or anyone else, can take that will be more remedial of our ills. All churches need reform, but only the Savior can remove the candlestick. Epistles were written to bring about correction and reform in churches, but in no epistle were disciples told to leave a church and start a pure church.

CHAPTER 27

OPEN MEMBERSHIP

It is such a turnoff expression that just to mention open membership brings an immediate adverse reaction from most of us in the Church of Christ. Few of us like the idea of closed membership, however. So, just where may we stand on the matter? Where is consistency?

Since the Scriptures do not speak of church membership — either open, closed, local, or universal — is this really a Scriptural matter? It seems not to have been the problem in the early church as we have made it.

Our first observation is so simple and universally agreed upon that it would seem that no problem could exist: Since the Lord adds the saved to the church without asking our approval or disapproval, it leaves no decision for us to make about it!

We tend to think in congregational and sectarian terms. We insist on placing membership in a congregation, which actually means that one applies for membership and is accepted or rejected by the group, judging by its sectarian slant. This, too, is a non-scriptural term, and a procedure of more recent origin among us. I never heard of placing membership until I went away to college. In our rural setting, disciples either assembled together, or they didn't assemble, and those who assembled were the church, with no question being raised as to whether it was open or closed membership. I never knew of a withdrawal of fellowship until after I began preaching.

The oneness of the body goes far beyond the matter of whether we who assemble in one place have compatible doctrinal and practical interpretations. There is one universal body whose parts are individual members. All who are in Christ are in it by the Lord's own choosing and action. The communion is a constant reminder and demonstration of the oneness of the body. Each participant is obliged to examine himself rather than his brother who shares in it. Those who judge and reject others fail to discern the oneness of that body; so, they eat and drink condemnation while participating in the very communion which symbolized the justification through Jesus' atonement.

Since I am to judge myself instead of my brother, I must accept him as my equal before the Lord on his own profession, just as others accept me and my participation on my own profession.

Suppose that this brother with whom you participate happens to be in error — as though anyone can be free of error; how does that affect you? His error is not your responsibility, for he is accountable to God who added him and God will handle the matter (Romans 14). You are not accountable for his sins, else how could you commune in fellowship with anyone? In any assembly, those who have fellowship in the Lord's Supper are of varying convictions and varying degrees of moral integrity. Yet, they cannot violate your conscience; only you can do that. You sin when you judge your fellow-disciple, however, and that should violate your conscience. This is a deadly epidemic which sweeps over us each Sunday morning as we reject others, continue to be sectarian in attitude, and maintain division while eating and drinking

exclusive of other disciples. In our minds, this spiritual disease shrinks the oneness of the body to our exclusive group.

In the Corinthian church with its segregating, party spirit, Paul very pointedly demanded that they let each person judge himself (1 Cor. 11:28). Each person decided on his own fellowship. It has become more characteristic of us today to follow the example of Diotrophes who “refuses himself to welcome the brethren, and also stops those who want to welcome them and puts them out of the church” (3 John 10). Those who assemble for the communion are the church rather than the church being a roll of those judged favorably by the congregational judges. The assembly in communion — sharing, fellowship, mutual participation — is the one body (1 Cor. 10:16f; 11:17-34).

The Lord’s way is not only ideal, but it is practical for us common, imperfect, misunderstanding human beings. It is not for angels. We must overcome our judgmental, sectarian, exclusivistic spirit so we can be at ease in accepting others. We must see that we can share with others without condoning what we consider as their sins, without approving what we consider as their doctrinal errors, and without participating in what they may be doing that is contrary to our scruples. We must accept each other as we are and where we are, and become mutually strengthening to each other.

Any group of people joining in organized activity must have some general understanding of its identity, purpose, and operation. We have avoided written rules of operation, generally, in our congregations, but we have them anyway, very definitely. There must be some understanding as to our beliefs, our aims, how business is to be conducted, how leadership is to be selected, how the program is to be carried on, who can teach, etc. Each group of disciples meeting together may rightly agree on those things, write them out, and follow them. Such a procedure becomes wrong only when the group declares its course to be the only acceptable course and refuses to accept others who do not follow its course. To any who may disagree, they may counsel: “If you feel that you cannot be free to participate according to our purpose, plans, and procedures, we encourage you to serve with some other group which conforms to your scruples. We will not love you less for it; we will continue to respect you as a brother, and we will cooperate with you wholeheartedly in promoting the cause of our Lord.”

By such an approach, each can be allowed to serve according to his own convictions without imposing his on others or being imposed upon by others. Conformity within each congregation would be voluntary so that the scruples of no one would be imposed on others. Such an arrangement would not grow out of sectarian exclusivism, but out of mutual love, respect, and desire for harmony. This irenic spirit would go far in breaking down the feelings of alienation.

The meeting in separate groups is not what makes disciples sectarian. Sectarianism is a judgmental, rejecting attitude. Such an attitude can prevail among parties within a congregation; yet, an accepting, loving attitude can prevail between groups that meet separately. Once we can admit that our particular segment of disciples is not the one, true church to the exclusion of all others, we will not feel compelled to set ourselves against all others. We can then serve, and let others serve, without trying to bind divisive scruples on everyone else. Then we can have unity of mind and purpose without forcing issues. These groups must work in harmony and without

competing. Their fellowship is in Christ, and, being in Christ, they must be in fellowship with all others who are in Christ.

I am not ignoring the exception to the rule — that some persons are to be delivered to Satan. He who renounces and denies the faith cannot be in fellowship. The flagrantly immoral person cannot be tolerated in his impenitence. The one who is divisive, trying to bind his scruples on all others, is not in communion with the one body. None of these is the sincere, but weak, stumbling, misguided brother, however.

Ideally, all disciples would be in total conformity in belief, judgment, and practice, serving in identical congregations, but that has never been and has little prospect of ever being. There is always a gap between the ideal and the practical. In practice, we must always make allowance for the lack of uniformity of conviction and practice, and continue to esteem differing ones who profess Christ as beloved brothers in the Lord.

You may decry this as “open membership” in its most disparaging sense, but I prefer to look upon it as the nonjudgmental acceptance that we are called upon to give to all who trust that the Lord has added them to his one body.

CHAPTER 28

ANOTHER LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT

While Thomas Campbell was trying to cope with the divided condition of the Presbyterians in Ireland, another Presbyterian minister, Barton W. Stone, was facing similar problems in Kentucky. He participated in the historic Cane Ridge (Kentucky) Revival in 1801. That revival meeting, initiated by Presbyterian preachers, also involved Methodist and Baptist preachers, with about three dozen preachers in all participating. Estimates of the attendance range from 12,000 to 30,000 people. Many people came from Tennessee and Ohio. It was a camp meeting with open-air services conducted simultaneously in various areas throughout the day and far into the night.

This ecumenical venture, thrilling as it was, brought charges from the Synod of Kentucky against some of the participating preachers. This led to the withdrawal from the Synod of Stone and four other preachers who then formed the Springfield Presbytery, consisting of fifteen churches. This presbytery was in existence for only nine months, until June 28, 1804. Its demise was unusual in nature, being willingly finalized by a historic document: *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*. It began with these words:

The Presbytery of Springfield, sitting at Cane Ridge, in the county of Bourbon, being, through a gracious Providence, in more than ordinary bodily health, growing in strength and size daily; and in perfect soundness of composure of mind; and knowing that it is appointed for all delegated bodies once to die; and considering that the life of every such body is very uncertain, do make and ordain this our last Will and Testament, in manner and form as following, viz.:

Imprimis. We will, that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large; for there is but one body, and one Spirit, even as we are called in one hope of our calling.

Item. We will that our name of distinction, with its Reverend title, be forgotten, that there be but one Lord over God's heritage and his name one.

In ten additional *Items*, these five men who signed the *Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery* called for freedom from church government and authority, and for the people to resume the right of internal government, accepting the Bible as the only sure guide to heaven. They called upon all to "cultivate a spirit of mutual forbearance; pray more and dispute less."

An *Address* was published with the *Will* restating their rejection of "church sessions, presbyteries, synods, general assemblies, etc." They concluded by declaring their unity with all believers. At that time they agreed to cast off all sectarian designations and call themselves *Christians*.

All who seriously desire Christianity and unity in their purest form must be thrilled by the actions of those men. It is contrary to our nature to admit that we have been misdirected and to try to start from the beginning again. To renounce what one has worked for so ardently and trusted in so sincerely must be like disinheriting one's own child. Few of us would have the conviction and courage to destroy our religious identity willingly. They were not giving up their convictions, but they were obeying convictions matured by openness to learning and reappraisal. Rather than defending their misdirection, as we are inclined to do, they retraced their steps back to the main road of nonsectarian Christianity.

Thomas Campbell came to America in 1807 and was joined by his family, which included his son, Alexander, in 1809, beginning his work in Pennsylvania. It was not until 1824 that Alexander Campbell met Barton W. Stone. Demonstrating the unity that they proclaimed, the two separate movements of these men merged in 1832. This exciting movement to unite the Christians of all the sects met with great success among the frontier people.

Claiming that unity heritage, we have reason for historic pride; yet, we have much reason for disappointment later. Through loss of perspective and misdirection in the generations after Stone and Campbell, the Movement failed to keep the unity. Dividing into three main churches with numerous subdivisions, which range from ecumenical inclusiveness to extreme exclusiveness, the Movement developed a sectarian spirit which has fostered denominational distinctions.

When Stone and his associates recognized their misdirection, they had the courage to dissolve what they had formed and to start over. Should we demonstrate that same courage and wisdom today by formulating *The Last Will and Testament of the Church of Christ*? Is that the alternative to the perpetuation of the sectarian exclusivism of the Church of Christ and its name of distinction?

There is no point in dissolving a group unless something better can be accomplished as a result of it. If the individuals involved move on into other existing bodies, what has been gained? Is there an identifiable "one, true church," which is the body at large, somewhere for them to become identified with? Are not those who compose the Church of Christ parts of the body at large inasmuch as they were added to it when they were baptized into the one body? They are in the body at large as individuals, even though, as a group, they are not the total body. They err in excluding others who are in the same body, serving in a "different fellowship." Even though we grieve at our misdirection and deplore our sectarian spirit, we do not deny that we are in the Lord's universal church.

Since we are congregational, the nearest that we can do to follow the example of those in the Springfield Presbytery is to redirect an entire congregation by teaching; yet, it is next to impossible to change a group as a whole. We are seeing many walkout groups, however, who abandon their former congregations because of the hopelessness of change. Some of those begin new groups wearing the Church of Christ name, while others leave that distinctive name behind. As long as a loving, accepting spirit prevails, these disciples may be commended in the exercise of their God-given freedom. Oppressive situations make such actions expedient. Conviction and courage, rather than a rebellious spirit, bring about reform and new beginnings.

The Springfield Presbytery was an organizational structure. Its member churches and individual members could agree to will it out of existence. There is no organizational structure among Churches of Christ to dissolve. When they dissolved their organization, that in no way changed their individual relationship with God, for, if they were children of God in the structure, they continued to be such afterwards. Within a sectarian framework, they had developed a non-sectarian spirit and sense of unity which constrained them to dissolve the presbytery. It was not the Last Will that changed their attitude, but their changed perspective produced the document.

Again, if we dissolve into the body at large, which group, or groups, will we be absorbed into? Are any of them more nearly identical with the New Testament standard than the Church of Christ? If so, it is only a matter of degree of conformity, rather than of one group being the true church and the other not being it. Rather than seeking to disperse any group that is in Christ, our aim should be to reform it. That is a lesson we gain from the epistles, for they called for the correction of ills within both the churches and individuals, rather than dissolution of the fellowships.

Individual relationship with God is emphasized so strongly in the New Testament writings that it is debatable if membership in a specific local church was expected. There is no such terminology in the scriptures as “members of the church.” There is no indication that they ever “placed membership, “enabling a local structure to have a “church roll.” Each individual holds a direct relationship with God in the church at large with no man or structure of men, either local or universal, through which he must serve God. Each has a fellowship, which is a sharing in spirit and practice with all other disciples of Christ, rather than just having a fellowship with those in “his congregation” and, perhaps, other identical congregations.

Many of our congregations have become so repressive that they allow for neither freedom nor reformation. Disciples often feel a hopelessness in such a group and move into a group that gives greater respect for individuality. The individual has that right and must exercise it discreetly in order to serve his/her own spiritual needs best.

Many discouraged disciples are leaving the Church of Christ and going into other organized and structured groups. By such action they may be solving some problems, but they are not solving all of the problems, or even the chief problem relating to unity. They still must ask and answer the questions we raised earlier as to whether there is a truly nonsectarian, nondenominational church to be found.

There is no obvious, visible, or structured nonsectarian, universal body which is composed of all, and only, those who are in Christ. The Lord still has one body; it cannot be divided. Disciples may reject each other, but the unity is not in the disciples so much as it is in the Head, Christ. Those disciples who compose the one body have separated themselves into sectarian groups, and the problem is not how to get them into one body, which they are already in, but to get them to cease rejecting each other. Our aim must not be to find a new structure or fellowship for all to unite in, but to redirect our thinking so as to become accepting of all who are in fellowship in, and with, Christ.

In order to do that, I need not give up my own convictions or compromise any doctrinal position. I must accept others as brothers because of their relationship to God in Christ. There is our basis of unity. That does not mean that I must approve all that my brothers believe or practice. They have to continue to work toward correcting their errors even as I must work to correct mine. Each must be in a continuous process of learning, growing, and reformation. Since Christ reconciled us all in one body in himself, he is the one who judges to accept or reject. He has not turned that job over to you and me. He is the one in the midst of the candlesticks and, if one needs removing, he is the one who will do it.

We might dream of a Utopian situation where all religious bodies of the world would execute a last will and testament to dissolve all of the existing churches so they might flow into one, universal, unnamed, nonsectarian, nondenominational body; however, that will never be, nor would it solve all problems of divisiveness. The dissolution of the Springfield Presbytery did not solve the problems permanently, for its heirs have not remained as one.

Yes, I like to dream of such a worldwide transformation; yet, when I awake to reality, I know that my best hope is to change attitudes which can dissolve the walls of structured religion.

CHAPTER 29

SAD THOUGHTS ABOUT CHURCH GROWTH

We in the Church of Christ trace our historical roots to what we have called the Restoration Movement of the Nineteenth Century. Thomas and Alexander Campbell began an effort to unite the Christians of all the sects. As the movement began to take root, it merged with another reform group led by Barton W. Stone. They sought to preach the ancient gospel and to restore the primitive unity which it promoted, claiming to be Christians only, but not the only Christians. The appeal and excitement of their plea caught fire in the American frontier, and soon the movement grew to be the fourth largest religious group in America, and also the largest indigenous group.

The thrust of the unity movement was blunted, however, by division. We are a part of that divided movement. At times in this century we have been the fastest growing church in America. However, according to studies made more recently, our growth rate peaked in the 1950's, with a great growth period in the 1945-1965 period. Early in the 1980's we seem to have reached a zero growth rate, and then we began to decline in growth rate.

My years of ministry have been within these periods of highest growth rate and decline of growth rate. I look back in an effort to evaluate my career as a minister in terms of enduring results. Perhaps, this will speak for other ministers, also. Because of lack of record keeping among our people, my statistics may lack in accuracy, but based upon my information and experience, I will make some observations.

As a youthful minister, I sometimes tried to encourage evangelism by explaining that every person on earth could be converted in just a few short years if each convert would, in turn, convert only two other persons each year. That mathematical progression concept seemed like a fantastic idea. Our expediting that process was less than fantastic, however.

Few of us ministers serve churches for more than forty years; so, forty years could represent the lifetime effort and accomplishment of the more enduring preachers. Likewise, a forty year old congregation could well represent the fruits of his life's labors, even though his work had been with several congregations. The church in New Braunfels was just about forty years old when I concluded my eight years of ministry with it (I worked part-time with it for two more years). Some of the churches that I worked with were smaller and some were larger than this one. This one church could well represent my career efforts, plus those of the people who compose the church. We could expect to see a congregation of tremendous size, couldn't we? Less than half of our congregations, regardless of age, have more than seventy-five members.

By our comparative standards, the church here would be considered as a thriving, growing, congregation of 292 members in 1981 when I began my retirement. During my 1973-1981 ministry, 126 persons were baptized (converted is not *our* word). Even though about two dozen

people transferred from it to begin a church at Canyon Lake, the group grew from 188 to 292 — a growth of 102, plus the two dozen, in eight years. Of the 126 converts, I would estimate that less than one-third are still in fellowship, either here or elsewhere. Of those baptized who were neither children nor spouses of members, only nine remain, six of them being in one extended family. Of the twenty-one persons converted in two intensive, summer campaigns, only two are still active, to my knowledge, and only two of the thirty-one Hispanics brought in are still enduring.

In spite of these depressing statistics, the church here has continued to grow, with a full house in attendance each Sunday.

To what may we attribute our numerical growth? Strangely, we must give credit to physical circumstance more than to the spiritual. New Braunfels is an attractive, small city with good economy, two spring-fed rivers, in the edge of the beautiful hill country of Texas, near veterans' hospitals and PX's, and near two major cities. People have migrated, including most of our church family.

Do you know of any congregation which is increasing in numbers due to conversions? I hope you do; there are a few. Only about one-fourth of our churches are growing, even by migrations. Isn't it true that most of our growing congregations are increasing at the expense of other congregations? Growth by transfer of membership is not church growth! It is truly sad to see so many of the older churches from which members have migrated, especially in the rural areas, diminished to no more than a fraction of their former size. In too many of them the members who are left are fifty years old, or older. About 25% of our churches are declining, and about one-half of our congregations are only holding their own. If a group is larger now than it was in the Sixties, the chances are that it is due to transfers rather than conversions.

I take no delight in making this gloomy assessment. In trying to place the blame for this condition, we may point to the social, economic, and cultural influences of materialism, secularism, humanism, hedonism, urbanization, and sophistication. Yet, if we look at ourselves, we may find that we have not made our message relevant to the needs of our hearers, or had a message to give strength and support to those who accept it. The gospel has power to overcome all of these ills if we will truly let Jesus shine through it instead of emphasizing doctrines and quibbles. Our mindset has led to the development of an oppressive system. The power is in the Christ rather than in the possession of correct answers to puzzling theological questions. Many of our supposed life-and-death doctrinal disputes have brought more death than life. Emphasis on doctrinal issues divides and repels, whereas, Christ draws all men to him, unites them, and sustains them.

The preacher alone cannot claim the credit for the growth of the church, for it also involves the efforts of the members working with him. In making this assessment, my life's work seems pitifully ineffective. Sometimes I wonder if there will be one person in heaven solely as a result of my efforts.

Yes, these are sad thoughts about church growth, the effectiveness of the ministry as we have developed it, and the fruits of a church program for forty years.

It is of some comfort to know that one soul is worth more than the whole world, but we must be concerned with a message and ministry that will reach the masses of humanity. Bright young men are becoming aware of the problem and working constructively toward a remedy. Will our protected congregational systems allow and encourage them, or will they have to go elsewhere to put reform into practice? I hope that, after their forty years of ministry, they are not compelled to have the same sad thoughts about church growth and career ministry that I have.

CHAPTER 30

MY FOUR RETIREMENT HOMES

During most of my years as a minister, the church supplied a residence for me and my family. That provision was much appreciated; however, it gave me no incentive to buy a house. In fact, the money which ordinarily would have been put into the purchase of a house was put in the parsonage of the church as a part of my salary.

As I looked into the future and my possible retirement, I had concern about where I would live. I had insufficient income with which to buy a house or to save for any substantial payment on one. I tried to trust in the Lord who promised to provide for such needs; yet, my faith was not without some wavering. God did work, and as I neared retirement, four houses were brought into consideration — and therein lies a tale of God’s providence.

A congregation with which I formerly worked initiated a wonderful program of providing housing and sustenance for retired ministers. One of the elders told me that, when I would be ready to retire, they would have a place for me. That was an invaluable assurance. After I began to publish my controversial writings, however, the matter of the house was never mentioned again. So, there went my first house.

My challenges of our traditional teachings and practices in the church here brought enthusiastic support from some and vehement rejection from others. In the tenth year of my association with the congregation, tensions became acute. So, Lea and I began to look at mobile homes in prospect of making a down payment on one in order to begin retirement, even with our very bleak financial outlook. But that second house did not become a reality, either.

When some of our friends heard of our intentions, they protested, “You are not going to live in a mobile home; we will not let you do it!” They proposed that several of them would jointly buy a house and let us live in it in our retirement. Even though we did not want to become a burden on our friends, that loving concern gave our depressed spirits a tremendous lift.

A few days later, in order to relieve some of the unbearable conflict that had developed, I told the elders that I would resign as soon as I could make arrangements for living quarters. From that moment, the miraculous working of God became evident. Our supporters began to reason that my salary through the years had paid for a residence for the church and that I should not be turned out without one to live in. Those who opposed me, out of both a sense of justice and a desire to be rid of me, agreed. All sorts of plans were investigated by which I could live in the parsonage rent free, hold it in life estate, or purchase it at a nominal price. Conflicts with social security benefits and income tax requirements made each proposal prohibitive. The only practical solution was for the church to deed the house to us as a gift. And so it is, we hold a deed of gift to this residence, to be ours as long as either of us live in it, and then it will revert back to the church. For such a thing to be accomplished by people in deep conflict shows the working of God. It is nothing short of a miracle that he brought our fourth house into reality.

Although we could not boast of having left everything to follow Jesus, as Peter and the others had done, the Lord let Lea and me enjoy the same promise that he made to them: “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life” (Matt. 19:27f).

Perhaps, I should not stop with the four houses. Just this week, a loving lady from a distant state, a person whom we have never seen or spoken with before, in a telephone conversation, invited us to come to live with her and her husband. And she really meant it!

None of us look forward to such a residence, but many of us will spend our last days in a nursing home, being dependent upon the care of others. If that happens to Lea or me, I hope that we can still recognize the hand of God in it.

All of earth’s houses are temporary. Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us so we may be with him forever. Paul, the tentmaker who looked upon his frail body as nothing more permanent than a tent, could share this hope with us: “For we know that if the earthly tent we live in be destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (2 Cor. 5:1).

LATER (1994): God still has surprises for us! Through the loving care of our children, Paul and Mira Prince, we have been provided another retirement home in Oregon at the address on the title page of his book.

CHAPTER 31

HOOK'S POINTS: A POTPOURRI

Grasping Thorns or Smelling Roses

How I missed the meaning of this comforting scripture: "It is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment" (Heb. 9:27)! Countless times I used this passage to warn listeners of the awesome certainty of death and judgment, without giving any attention to the "so Christ" clause that followed.

Let us read the rest of that sentence: "So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him."

Jesus came to be our substitute, to stand in our place; so, Christ died in our place and met the demands of judgment for us. The Word became a man, accepting our appointment of death and judgment. If we will believe in him, he will give us life and account us as righteous in the judgment. He is to come again, not to deal with sin, but to save from death those who eagerly await his coming.

What a consolation to know that our death and judgment have been experienced for us already by our proxy, Jesus Christ!

To misuse this passage to induce the feel of the thorns of death and judgment is to fail to enjoy the fragrance of hope and assurance Jesus put into it. Turn loose of the thorns and smell the rose.

The Day of Judgment

The Scriptures speak of the day of judgment several times. It seems that most of us have some mental picture of the great throng of risen humanity gathered before an awesome throne occupied by God in his glory. One by one, we are called to stand in his majestic presence to give account of our earthly conduct and to hear our sentence.

There may be some accuracy in such an imagined scene, but I would like for you to think about the "day." That "morning of the resurrection and day of judgment" may be stretched out a bit. If, in such a judgment scene, God gives each of us one short minute, how long would it take? Now, arithmetic is not my long suit, but, if I figure correctly, it would require 9,512 years to judge the 5 billion people on earth today. If there are as many as 20 billion to be judged, that day would stretch out to 38,051 years. Even if that judgment process began when Jesus ascended, that waiting line is growing faster than you can count.

Don't misunderstand me. I am not making light of the judgment or of our accountability. God can handle the matter without my help. The point that I wish to make is that we cannot afford to

be too literalistic about some of the things that even seem to be stated definitely. Literal interpretations often miss the larger picture.

“My Record! ‘Tis In Heaven!”

Some years ago I received a church bulletin with a sheet of paper inserted which bore the above heading. From it one might get the idea that this was a copy of God’s own ledger for keeping individual records.

The recipient was supposed to keep his own record by filling the blanks through the year. It was mailed at the beginning of the new year and consisted of a listing of the fifty-two weeks with an appropriate place to check one’s attendance on Sunday mornings and evenings and Wednesday nights and a space to fill in the amount of contribution each week.

By keeping this record, a person could determine his current righteousness at a glance! Why hadn’t someone come up with this handy form before?

Anxieties concerning the judgment would be dispelled by such a simple procedure. “‘Tis in heaven!” There would be no surprises in the judgment. Perhaps, you should take your copy along, just in case the Lord got his records mixed up.

If the preacher who produced that form were challenged about these matters being the extent of the Lord’s concern, I am sure that he would add a thousand things that are important in our spiritual life. This bulletin insert, however, illustrates the undue emphasis that many of us have given to attendance and giving. A living relationship with Jesus, spirituality, morality, service to others, and the fruits of the Spirit in general have been left as distant runner-ups to attendance and giving.

Praise the Lord, there is widespread recognition of that misdirection now. We are accepting righteousness by faith and praising God for his grace by worship, service, and clean living.

“Demas Has Forsaken Me.”

We preachers have given Demas a bad time. While it is admitted that what Paul wrote about him is far from flattering, we have tended to be unmerciful in our judgment of him.

While Paul was in prison and his execution seemed imminent, he wrote, “For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica” (2 Tim. 4:10).

When someone fails us in time of spiritual crisis, we tend to think that he has deserted the Lord. Paul said that Demas had deserted him, not the Lord. Being in love with this present world might indicate spiritual abandonment, but it might not mean that. The axe was about to fall on Paul. Epaphras was imprisoned with him also. Demas, being involved and implicated with Paul, possibly was in immediate danger of receiving the same sentence with Paul. Demas loved this world and was not eager to leave it. So, he made a “strategic withdrawal” ahead of any arrest warrant.

I cannot prove my point any more than I can prove that he forsook the Lord. Rather than just being the Devil's advocate in this case, I hope to make you aware of how we tend to make the worst case that we can against a brother rather than to offer gracious sympathy to a faltering brother in order to strengthen him.

A Great Mystery

You are familiar with the beautiful analogy that Paul makes of the relationship of husband and wife to that of Christ and the church recorded in Ephesians 5:21-33. In verse 31 he states, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one." Paul is alluding to the relationship established between Adam and Eve, but he is not applying the point to the husband-wife relationship of disciples, as I so long supposed.

Paul makes a different application. He concludes with, "This is a great mystery, and I take it to mean Christ and the church."

Jesus fulfilled the analogy when, as the eternal Word becoming flesh, he left his Father and became a man. Then, on the cross he left his mother, commending this "woman" to the care of John.

The church is composed of humans, all aliens from Jesus' divine heritage. He became one flesh with sinful humanity, one flesh with a bride lacking the sanctity of his divine Father and virgin mother. He had to leave his mother at Golgotha in order to sanctify his bride so he could become one with her.

Christ has removed the spots and wrinkles of his bride making her holy and without blemish. Does that describe the church you know? It does not picture the outward features of the church I know, but it identifies the grace I know! The love of Christ is the cosmetic of grace which covers her spots and blemishes by accounting her as clean and beautiful. Our beauty is in the eye of the Beholder.

Reviling Judgments

We should be able to find more profitable things to do than to teach our children to sing, "If the devil doesn't like it, he can sit on a tack!"

Perhaps, we have more insolence toward the devil than the archangel dared to have. In a passage of some mystery (Jude 9), Jude informs us, "But when the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, disputed about the body of Moses, he did not presume to pronounce a reviling judgment upon him, but he said, 'The Lord rebuke you'."

If Michael did not presume to pronounce a reviling judgment upon the devil, surely we should have fear about pronouncing reviling judgments upon fellow disciples with whom we differ.

The Lost Tail

Evolutionists tell us that, while we were evolving, our bodies adapted according to our needs causing us to gain some functions and to lose others. For example, they explain that, when we came down out of the trees, we no longer needed a tail; so, it disappeared, except for the vestigial tailbone.

That just could not be right. If we adapted according to need, then, because we have need of a more versatile eye, instead of the tail disappearing, it would have developed an eye on the tip of it. Just think how handy that would be. It would enable one to dodge while in full retreat. A fellow could peek around a corner without exposing himself. It would relieve the problem of finding the quarter that rolled under the dresser. And, especially of value to me with such poor memory, I could place my sermon script in the pulpit stand and read it while looking my listeners straight in the eyes.

Forgive and Forget

In his promise to forgive our sins, God has assured us that he will remember our sins no more. He forgives and forgets. From this thought, some lofty-minded teachers have concluded that, for us to truly forgive someone, we must actually wipe their offense from our memory and forget that it happened.

Can you willfully forget something? Decide to forget the name of your grandfather. Can you do it? The harder you may try to forget something, the more indelibly it will remain in the memory. Of course, we forget loads of things that we try to remember.

The demand that we erase from memory the offense committed against us before we can forgive and be forgiven is absurd, impractical, and guilt-inducing. In forgiving, we must be able to accept a person again as though the offense had not occurred, but we cannot deliberately erase it from our memory.

When God forgives, remits, covers, washes away, or blots out our sins, he accepts us as though the offense were erased from his memory.

Where's The Fire?

While one of our local funeral homes was constructing a nice, modern facility, I had several funerals in association with the owner. He was fuming, "up to here," with governmental regulations. The government dictated details that I had never dreamed of before.

All of this was impressed upon me quite unexpectedly when I had my first funeral in the new facility. I was ushered to take the seat behind the speaker's stand near the deceased. There it was, bracketed inside the speaker's stand — a fire extinguisher!

Do you suppose — ?

Legislating Morality

“You cannot legislate morality!” is the scream that we hear each time that effort is made to curb public profanity, nudity, or pornography.

I don't know how I came to be so warped in my understanding of things, but I was under the impression that we have always had laws governing morals. We have laws against assault, murder, theft, robbery, embezzlement, impure foods, dope, public drunkenness, driving while intoxicated, rape, slander, perjury, child abuse, child labor, and many other such immoral actions. These are all dealing with morals. In fact, I would judge, a greater part of our laws regulate the relationships of persons. That is what morality is all about — a person's relationship with fellow human beings.

It is true that one cannot be forced to become moral by legislation, but our laws are meant to protect society from immoral persons. To give the individual license under the guise of personal rights is to violate the rights of others. That is immoral. Our obsession with individual rights which violate the rights of the general public is undermining the basic structure of our society. It is incumbent upon the individual to defer to society rather than the society having to try to conform to each erratic individual.

“Said A Spider To A Fly”

“Will you walk into my parlour?” said a Spider to a Fly; “‘Tis the prettiest little parlour that ever you did spy.” In this manner, Mary Howitt begins her portrayal of the universal enticement to sexual immorality.

Here comes the carefree fly: “And I have seen among the simple... a young man without sense, passing along the street near her corner, taking the road to her house.” (Read Proverbs 7 RSV).

The lurking spider appears: “And lo, a woman meets him, dressed as a harlot, wily of heart.” She spins her web: “She seizes him and kisses him.” “With much seductive speech she persuades him; with her smooth talk she compels him.”

Behold her sensuous parlour: “I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon. Come, let us take our fill of love till morning; let us delight ourselves with love.” The temptress disdainfully mislabels sexual sin as “love” and the satisfaction of lust as “making love,” declaring such action to be clean and wholesome, for “with impudent face she says to him: I had to offer sacrifices, and today I have paid my vows.” “A pretty little parlour with the stench of death!

This “liberated woman” declares that there are no entanglements in her web, assuring, “My husband is not at home.” “Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant. But he does not know that the dead are there, and that her guests are in the depths of Sheol” (Prov. 9:17f). The pretty little parlour is the trap of death. “All at once he follows her, as an ox goes to the slaughter... as a bird rushes into a snare; he does not know that it will cost him his life.” The

“safe sex” will not prevent the loss of the soul, physical death through AIDS or other disease, or being killed by a jealous husband or lover.

“Be not deceived,” God pleads, “neither the immoral, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:10). The fornicator’s lot will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone (Rev. 21:8). A pretty little parlour, indeed!

“Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for God will judge the immoral and adulterous” (Heb. 13:4).

“And now, O sons, listen to me,
and be attentive to the words of my mouth.
Let not your heart turn aside to her ways,
do not stray into her paths;
for many a victim has she laid low;
yea, all her slain are a mighty host.
Her house is the way to Sheol,
going down to the chambers of death.”

JOY

Since I was a teenager half a century ago, I have heard preachers define joy, using the acrostic to explain that, in order to have true joy, one must put Jesus first, others second, and yourself third. That always sounded so pious, holy, and idealistic — until I tried to teach some practical application of it.

If by putting Jesus first, we mean to try to understand and do his will in every matter of life, that is fine. But what does it mean to put others before ourselves? Must we feed everyone else before we eat? Must we pay the debts of others before we pay our own? Must we love others more than ourselves. Jesus told us to love our neighbor as ourselves, not more than ourselves. If a person does not provide for his own needs first, he is unable to care for the needs of others. Jesus did not prescribe a life of depriving of ourselves, but of sharing. His way is practical.

The Preacher’s Pride

Although we preachers feel compelled to appear humble, most of us have a healthy pride which sometimes betrays us. When a certain preacher was called to appear as a witness in a court trial, one of his deacons went along with him as a spectator. As the minister took the stand, the attorney began with some introductory questions.

“What is your profession?”

“I’m a preacher.”

“How would you describe yourself as a preacher?”

“I am the best one in the state of Texas,” he declared rather hesitantly.

The dumbfounded deacon could hardly believe his ears. He knew that the preacher had won no blue ribbons for his efforts. Pink slips, but no blue ribbons.

Immediately after the preacher was dismissed by the court, the deacon joined him in the hall and blurted out, “Why in the world did you tell those people that you are the best preacher in Texas?”

“I had to tell them,” he confessed; “I was under oath!”

The Minister’s Contribution

The paid minister gives a part of his paycheck back into the collection in order to help pay for his next one. Now, think about that strange practice for a minute. If his life is committed to the serving of the congregation, why should he be expected to give money into it? Maybe, we have missed the difference in being hired and being devoted. A devoted person, like a Catholic priest or nun, is supported, but not hired. He or she does not pay for his or her own support. Why pay the preacher an extra \$50.00 per week so he can put it back into the treasury? That is more than a little foolish. By letting the church deduct the \$50.00 off the top by agreement, the minister will have to pay taxes on \$2,600 less each year.

Wasted Hours

I give credit to an amiable critic and friend of mine for causing me to become more aware of the value of man-hours relating to my work. If I speak to 360 people for thirty minutes, I have used 180 man-hours of the time of my listeners. If I do not deliver a relevant, worthwhile lesson, I waste the equivalent of 22.5 workdays of their time. Eight hours of preparation is little if it is to involve 180 hours of their time. If I keep my audience waiting one minute, I waste six hours. When I waste the time of an assembled group, I waste opportunity — and fast! So, I have always tried to be relevant, punctual, and brief!

Notice that I just said that I have tried. That has not kept me from hearing such smart aleck remarks as:

“You give us lots of food for thought, but I prefer fast foods!”

“Preacher, don’t feel bad that my husband got up and walked out during your sermon; he wasn’t angry at you; he often walks in his sleep!”

“A preacher ought to be as smart as my wife’s washing machine. When it spins dry, it cuts off!”

“For a sermon to be immortal, it is not necessary that it be eternal!”

Lost Innocence

In earlier years it afforded me much delight to see a building bearing our “Church of Christ” designation, or to visit another of our congregations. My pride was inflated if it was a nice, large building in a good location.

That innocent joy is diminished now. Now, I am aware of the work, struggle, tears, tensions, discouragements, power struggles, and misdirections represented by that building. It required a generation or two or three for the congregation to grow to the present size of a few dozen or a few hundred members. And they feel that they are the misunderstood, self-congratulated chosen few of the one, true church.

Do you suppose that Jesus shares some of my sadness and disappointment as he looks at that building?

Pro-Choice

“I have the right to do as I please with my own body” is the often heard catch-line of the abortionists. Liberationists have repeated that expression so often that they have actually come to believe that it is true.

Does a woman have the right to her own body? She does, but only in a limited sense. She has not the right to house her body in my garage, to let it scream in her neighbors’ windows in the night, to march it into a men’s public rest room, to present it unclothed in public, to use her body for prostitution, to engage it in homosexual activities, to practice drunken driving, or to feed her body while letting her child starve. These actions of her body would be immoral because they violate other persons.

Does a woman violate another person when she aborts her own child by choice? Such “pro-choice” is the choice to destroy the life of her unborn child for her own selfish interests. No one has a right to be selfish.

Our “liberated” people cry out in holy horror against killing a chimpanzee in a useful medical experiment or executing the most hardened criminal while, at the same time, adamantly demanding the legal right to terminate the lives of countless thousands of human beings!

The attending angels who stand in God’s presence in behalf of the little ones must look in horror. God must weep!

(There is an inconsistency in our reasoning as to when life begins. We declare that the fetus is a living being; but, we deny that the spiritual life, which is analogous to birth, begins until a person is brought forth from the baptismal birth.)

Priorities

A chigger bite (I know, they are *chigoes*, not *chiggers*; and they raise *welts*, not *whelps*; a whelp is a young carnivore such as a cub or pup) can just about drive you crazy. It can do so if you have nothing more important to occupy your attention. However, if your child is in danger or your house is on fire, you forget about chigger bites, the blister on your heel, the headache, and all other annoying irritations.

There ought to be some sort of lesson there somewhere for grumblers and excuse makers, but I don't feel up to preaching tonight.

Worldliness

Although we do not use that word much any more, in my youth worldliness was a popular topic for preachers. Usually, the definition included the sins of youth, dancing, new fads, new styles, movies, and forms of recreation other than those which the speaker engaged in. The definition and denunciations changed constantly due to the change in acceptance of new things in our society.

Since worldliness is a threat to our souls, we need to know more specifically what it is. My definition must be objective rather than an expression of my prejudices and fears. John elaborates on this subject, and his explanation of worldliness may take us by surprise. In *First John* 2:15-16, John analyzes "the love of the world" as (1) the craving for physical satisfaction, (2) the fondness for aesthetic things, and (3) the concern for status. Consider these separately.

1. Craving for Physical Satisfaction. It is normal for us to desire comfortable surroundings for the body, to enjoy good food, to crave sexual fulfillment, and to protect our bodies from external irritations and dangers. There is no special merit in depriving the body of these satisfying things. But to make one of these things our chief concern in life is to become materialistic, or worldly minded. This is the lust of the flesh.
2. Fondness For Aesthetic Things. God gave us a sense of appreciation for the beautiful, for all the arts, for tasteful appointments in our surroundings, for the enhancement of our personal and bodily attraction. If music, art, learning, drama, beautiful house, or clothing become the great thing in your life, then the lust of the eye is your sin.
3. Concern For Status. All of us want to be noticed, to be loved, to be accepted. This is a useful yearning that God put into our nature to make us compatible social beings. If this concern becomes an overpowering drive in you expressing itself in pride, hypocrisy, extravagance, social climbing, or joining the rat race in general, then the vainglory of life has become your goal. Status seeking is worldliness.

Satan's appeal to us is through good things. Every good impulse could lead to sin. God's hold on us is through self-control. God wants us to use all of our instinctive drives and the materialistic things which fulfill them for eternal goals. It is when we forget the eternal aim of life and all that pertains to it that we become worldly.

Paul wrote that “all things are lawful for me; but I will not be brought under the power of any” (1 Cor. 6:12). The world is ours for use and enjoyment with self-mastery. Sin is not in things, but in people when they abandon self-control. Loss of temperance results in a shift in our sense of values. Over-evaluation of temporal things is worldliness.

Those Highway Signs

I suppose that there is still some good purpose fulfilled by our highway signs, but my heart no longer leaps up when I see one, as it tended to do in times past.

Those roadside signs usually advertise the Church of Christ rather than Christ.

They speak of our obscurity because of our lack of numbers and the poor locations of our building. The larger denominations seldom advertise by such billboards.

Those signs are an expression of our legalistic beliefs about the necessity of meeting thrice weekly even when we are on a journey. The schedule of services is there as a reminder of that duty.

Our signs reveal our exclusivistic stance. They do not encourage attendance in any general way, but only with the group doing the advertising. Usually, they don't even list other congregations of the Church of Christ.

Many of the signs were put up as a part of an ambitious project several years ago. Then they were forgotten, and the deteriorated sign advertises that disinterest to every passerby.

Only In The Lord

Paul tells us that the Christian widow is free to marry “only in the Lord” (1 Cor. 7:39). Generally, our people have concluded that Paul means that she must only marry a Christian, that is, a member of the Church of Christ. That is thought to be a lawful restriction. If it is a legal prohibition against marrying a non-Christian, then it raises some very troublesome questions.

Must the man whom she marries have proven himself to be a faithful disciple? How zealous must he be to qualify? Who is to judge him? What if he renounces his discipleship after marriage? If he is baptized and attends services only so that she will marry him, how does that affect the validity of the marriage?

Is marriage to an unbeliever sinful? If so, how does one repent of it and make correction? Suppose that he is converted after the marriage; is it still a sinful relationship? Is such a marriage adultery? If so, does repentance demand divorce? If she recognizes her sin and divorces her husband because he is not a Christian, is she free to remarry?

Does this same restriction of marrying only a believer apply to widowed men also? If so, why did Paul not say so? Does this restriction apply to all marriages, to both men and women,

whether they are single or widowed? If so, why did Paul only apply it to widows? Have you the right to make wider application than Paul made?

When we approach this statement of Paul as a lawful prohibition, we find ourselves entangled in many unanswerable questions and possibilities. Since some of Paul's teachings in this chapter express his own opinion, judgment, and advice of expediency, we may consider this as a part of it. While it may not be best to marry an unbeliever for a number of reasons of expediency, it cannot be classed as a sinful defilement to do so.

Jonah Was A Baptist!

A person once told me of attending a Baptist service in which the preacher's subject was "Jonah Was A Baptist!" The preacher would elaborate on a particular wrong attitude or misconduct of Jonah and then apply it pointedly by asking, "Isn't that just like a Baptist?"

I find two things objectionable to that sermon: (1) I did not think of it first, and (2) Jonah must have been one of my persuasion instead of a Baptist!

The truth may be that Jonah was one of our preachers. He was the cause of the entire problem. When the mariners threw him overboard, the storm subsided. It is worth a try, for we sorely need the calm.

Fencing Dogs and Children

When we got our first poodle we had a back yard in which to keep her which was walled with a five-foot concrete block fence. As we let her out of the house, there was little worry about her safety. No training was needed to keep her in the yard. But one day she did slip out and, due to her lack of experience outside, she became totally disoriented and was even afraid of me when I found her.

We moved to our present residence where we have no fenced yard. She was unaccustomed to such freedom. In spite of our precautions when we let her outside, she did not last long. She was soon killed by a car.

Then we got another poodle. Having no fenced yard to contain her, we trained her to keep away from the street. We would let her go outside unwatched whenever she wished for as long as she desired, and we had little anxiety about her safety. She survived twelve years with no fateful accident.

The first dog had a fence which kept her from developing responsibility, a fence of external forces. The second had a much better and stronger fence-training which made her responsible.

Sincere parents often seek to protect their children by making all their decisions for them and by building the fence of their own consciences around them. Then as the children go out on their own, they often disappoint their parents by irresponsible conduct because they were never trained and trusted to make responsible decisions. Enforcing parental fences does not always

develop responsibility. Forced conduct is not effective training because it provokes resistance and anger.

“Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4).

I Was Wrong!

In my first book, [*Free in Christ*](#), I stated that I was brought up in the “strictest sect of the Pharisees.” A reader wrote to advise me that I had made an error in the book. He explained that my claim to having been brought up in the strictest sect of the Pharisees was wrong. After he went through the list of all the things that the congregation of his youth was against, I wrote him a letter confessing that I was wrong!

Made Of Dust

“Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was,” Solomon explains concerning the body after death. We are made of dust, that is, of the elements of this earth which we eat and drink. God begins this formation in the womb from the substances in our mother’s body. In that manner, he creates, forms, and makes us through a process.

God made Adam of the dust from the ground. First, in the process, God formed man. Then God breathed in this created man the breath of life which resulted in the man becoming something that he had not become until that time — a living soul.

Did God form man by a process? As much as we have resisted such a conclusion, it seems evident from the record that he did. Are we limited to the concept that God scooped some soil and patted it together (with spiritual hands?) into a sort of mud man, and then he breathed life into it, all in a few moments time? Why should it be considered as a threat to our faith to admit that we do not know all of the time and process that God used? Any way that you picture it, God is still the Creator.

Bringing Spices

With spices to perfume Jesus’ dead body, the women came to the tomb that Sunday morning. Although we are touched with the love demonstrated by the two Marys, we are disappointed also. Why take embalming spices to an empty tomb? They should have expected to find an empty tomb.

Their attachment to him was sufficient to bring forth a loving service, but it was lacking in a real faith in his resurrection.

We can bear spices of homage also each Sunday morning without really expecting to find an empty tomb. Darkened by materialistic concepts, our convictions about eternity are shaded. This world is too much with us. We live too much for the *now* and not enough for the *then*. We

may accept some standards of conformity without true dedication to a conviction. In so doing, we may be only a step ahead of admitting that Jesus still needs our spices in the tomb.

Our underlying doubts may betray us like those of the little girl whose cat was killed. Seeking to console the distraught child, the mother explained, "God loves cats too. He saw what a lovely Kitty you had and took her to his beautiful home so she can be his own Kitty." "Don't be silly, Mother," the girl protested indignantly, "What would God want with a dead cat!"

What real difference would it make in your life if you should learn that Jesus did not rise from the dead? What change would you make if *you really* believed that he arose?

Artificial Flowers

The plastic flower is a symbol of our age, an artifact of our culture. More colorful than the real, it is an exaggeration, a flattery of truth. Behold the bouquet, a beautiful arrangement of artificialities!

It can be bought. No effort of cultivation is needed. It is carefree. What if it is phony, void of fragrance? We become content with the emptiness.

We strive to buy fine houses that we don't take time to live in, period furniture to share with no one, stereos whose incessant music we have little ear to appreciate, televisions whose fascination fails to satisfy, and luxurious automobiles which scurry us about to nowhere.

We are striving after the wind, purchasing mass produced, artificial happiness at the discount store.

We rob mission fields to provide impressive houses of worship, then make them empty shells by our lack of devotion. They stand as symbols of artificial religion. The building can be bought; religion is harder to come by.

We pay preachers to minister, personal workers to convert, singers to revive, teachers to instruct, missionaries to evangelize, and house parents to care for the orphans. This is better than nothing. Plastic flowers are better than none.

Is it purchased? Then where is the fragrance?

Memorials of Freedom

While, helpless and hopeless, his people wept,
When enslaved in misery,

God looked on their tears and his promise kept,
Sending one to set them free.

They sprinkled the blood of the lamb they shared,
And, in haste, not waiting morn,

The captor God spoiled and the firstborn saved,
And a nation that night was born.

“What meaning has this?” would their children say,
Through the years as they would eat.

“The meaning is clear: We recall the way
In which Pharaoh met defeat;

God led us all out by a mighty hand,
Spared our lives, and set us free;

We praise him with wine, bitter herbs, bread, and
The lamb slain for you and me.”

Our Lord, in the night when his hour had come,
Gave the bread a truth to teach:

“This bread is my body; let each eat some;
There’s a share of me for each.

This cup is my life in my blood, I give;
Drink you all for you’re set free;

One day I’ll return and take you to live
In eternal peace with me.”

So, Lord, as your chosen, redeemed, as one,
As your nation, now we share:

In grateful remembrance, we praise your Son,
For he took our sins to bear.

In bread and the cup we discern today,
Our atonement paid for sin;

One voice we lift up to sing praise, and pray,
“Let your Spirit live within.”

— Cecil Hook

Another Cross

Against the darkness of life's sky,
Three crosses stand through history;
Despair on one, another hope;
The third holds lasting victory.
His cross gave hope to him who cried,
"In life to come, remember me!"
Today, in clearer light I view
Another cross — a cross of praise.
I'm crucified to self with Christ;
From death to life he did me raise.
Anew, I'll live by faith in him,
Both now and through unnumbered days.
His cross atoned, but mine I lift
In praise for all to hear;
By bread and wine, I now proclaim,
With all who now in him draw near,
His death for me, until he comes,
My painless cross gives hope and cheer.
With saints I thank you, Christ, my Lord;
On your cross you remembered me.
The penal cross I cannot bear;
My cross is light; it lifts me free;
From sin released, I thank you for
That cross of praise you gave to me.

— Cecil Hook

My Filthy Rags He Wore

I worked so hard for God's acclaim,
To lay in heav'n a treasure store;
But then I learned to my deep shame
That only filthy rags I wore.
No worthy record could I claim
To open wide salvation's door;
The deeds I did to remove my blame
Were just as filthy rags I wore.
I saw in Christ the only right;
He opened heaven's treasure store,
Gave me his robe so clean and white,
And my old filthy rags he wore.
A hungry pauper, weak and lame,
For crumbs of grace, I did implore;
He gave a ring, a robe, his name!
Yes, then my filthy rags he wore.

He gave me life — his own, to me;
Through death's dark veil he went before;
I praise again his memory;
Praise him, my filthy rags he wore!
In bread and wine. as one, we all
Commune with him, and still adore;
We all, as one, on God may call,
Because our filthy rags he wore.
— Cecil Hook

Heritage

Our older grandson, Daniel Hook, obeyed the gospel last year at the age of eleven. He represents the sixth generation of three branches of our family of the Stone-Campbell heritage. I shared this information with him in a letter the next day.

Dear Daniel,

Because of your lovely attitude and your upbringing in a devoted and spiritual family, I fully expected you to become obedient to the gospel; yet, it came as a pleasant surprise when you called to tell us that you had made your commitment to God on June 29, 1986. It brought me much joy.

If you can always remember and frequently recall how happy your baptism made you feel, it will be a great encouragement for you to continue in your lifelong profession of discipleship, even in times of doubt, temptation, and opposition. You have learned that doing right makes you happier. Your faith will become more precious to you than your life. In our world of upheaval and change, you may be called upon to choose between your faith and your life.

Paul wrote to Timothy: "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you" (2 Timothy 1:5). I have no means of tracing the roots of your faith back through your ancestors; however, your heritage in the Church of Christ comes through the families of both your father and your mother.

So far as I know, through my side of the family, it began before the Civil War in Kentucky with the L. A. McAlisters. Their son, I. B. McAlister, married Alice Olive Hanks whose daughter, Lydia Emily (Emma), married George Washington Moore. He was an illiterate and rough character. She taught him to read and write using the Bible as her textbook. In time, he was converted and did some preaching through the years, but never as a professional preacher.

Lora Dean was the oldest of eleven children of George and Emma Moore. She refused to marry her prospective husband, Solomon S. Hook, your great grandfather from whom you got your first and last names, until he agreed to be baptized. Of the six children of Sol and Deanie (one died in infancy), the two sons, George and I, and one son-in-law, Owen Aikin, were vocational ministers; and two other sons-in-law, Fay L. Wilson and Herman (Tiny) Charles, gave limited service in preaching.

On Lea's side of the family, two of your great, great, great grandfathers, Jim Pace and John Moye, were zealous members of the church in the piney woods of Southeast Texas. John's son, George Moye, who married Jim Pace's daughter, Flora, was the leader in the little church in Votaw, Texas for many years. Your great grandmother, Elma Rosie Belle, their oldest child, married Thomas Watson Holladay. Watt did not become a Christian until Elma Lea, their only child, was married, but then he became the leader in the little church in Daisetta, Texas.

So, you can see that you are of the seventh generation to serve God in the Restoration Movement dating back through about three quarters of the history of the Movement, and back before the beginning of the Church of Christ as a separate church in the Stone-Campbell Movement.

Although it enriches us to know of our heritage, it does not mean that we can depend upon inherited religion. You must develop your own faith and convictions, establish and maintain your own relationship with God, and serve in the ministry that God gives to you individually.

It is my prayer, my hope, and my confidence that this will be accomplished happily in your spiritual life.

I love you.

Grandpa

(No kin; just trivia: An ancestor of Johnny Carson, Dr. Daniel Hook, mayor of Savannah, Georgia, was a leader in starting a Restoration church there in 1835. Alexander Campbell visited there in 1838.)

Personally Speaking

To think that you might read all three of my books amazes me. I suppose it is because of my insecure nature that I feel both flattered and embarrassed about it. I am flattered that you would consider it worth your time, but I am embarrassed at the lack of sophistication of my material.

I know that my writings serve a need for only a limited segment of people at this particular stage of our development as a religious body. I trust that the Spirit is directing them to the earnest, open-minded pew-people among us. Because my children have been brought up in a changing time, they have not needed these messages like my generation has. And I trust that, due to redirection affected in the church as a whole, my grandchildren will see little that is surprising or unorthodox about my writings.

Neither of these volumes has the customary page of dedication. Such a dedication would necessarily be to Lea, my wife of forty-two years, because of her many lovable and virtuous qualities. Really, instead of dedicating the volumes to her, I have considered her as co-producer of them. Although I have been the spokesman while she has filled the endearing role of wife and mother, our lives and efforts have been inseparable, mutually dependent, and mutually supportive. So, I consider her as an equal partner in all of our ministry. She has given input, evaluation, and proofreading to all of my writings — except this page.

A dedication would have to include our children, who have always given us cause to be proud. And we are blessed with the choicest daughter-in-law and son-in-law who both come from solid, Christian families. Sol and Linda (Williamson) Hook, with their children, Daniel, Ryan, and Hayley, live in Vivian, Louisiana. Paul and Mira Prince live in Palo Alto, California. They all are very much involved in spiritual life and are blessed to enjoy the good things of life. My thoughts of them are all happy thoughts.

Although I intend to study and write as long as the Lord gives me the ability, it is unlikely that I shall publish another book, for I am sure that I have already extended myself beyond my qualifications.

Our widened acquaintance through the writings has enriched our lives. Thank you for the many letters, calls, and visits by which Lea and I have been so encouraged. Thank you for the many enabling donations and the purchases of books. We live only a few seconds off Interstate 35. Stop by for a Texas “howdy.”

May your life be filled with such simple pleasure and peace as I am enjoying this exquisite, fall morning, October 7, 1987.