

Free to Change

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Preface

Why change? Why unsettle your mind? Why rock the boat? Without change there can be no growth!

Change for the sake of change is of questionable value, but change is necessary for maturing.

Even though physical development is mostly involuntary, it can be encouraged or restricted in some ways. Spiritual growth must be sought voluntarily. Progress in broadening our knowledge and understanding may be limited by lack of incentive. It may be impeded by illiteracy, misdirection, lack of time, and other circumstantial factors. It may be blocked by prejudice and fear. These factors can imprison and enslave us by restricting our freedom to change.

Change can be stifled and frustrated by fears of cutting loose from ideas in which we have found comfort and security. We fear being the cause of controversy. We dread the rejection, misrepresentation, and abuse that leaders suffer. We anticipate with fright the loss of vested interests — status, role, reputation, income. We have to be the “good ol’ boy” to keep our place.

When we are supported by the system, we must support the system, and as long as we please a system, we are not free.

Once a person can release himself or herself from these tension traps, there is a new world of discovery ahead to explore. One may then go to the Scriptures with nothing to prove and no apprehension as to what will be learned. Bible reading becomes a new, exciting, and refreshing experience. It brings one much closer to God even though misguided fellow-disciples may tend to reject the freed one. These friends may think that one is reacting to some bitterness or disappointment. They find it hard to believe that one is just being honest with self.

Without intellectual honesty, one is not free to change. Honesty is not demonstrated by parroting the party line, but it is seen in the expanding to the dimensions of new-found truth.

The following paragraph entitled The Love Of Truth by an unknown writer was sent to me by Bob Gleaves, of Brentwood, Tennessee: “To love truth sincerely means to pursue it with an earnest, conscientious, unflagging zeal. It means to be prepared to follow the light of evidence even to the most unwelcome conclusions, to labor earnestly to emancipate the mind from early prejudices, to resist the current of desires and the refracting influence of the passions, to proportion on all occasions conviction to evidence, and to be ready, if need be, to exchange the calm of assurance for all the suffering of a perplexed and disturbed mind. To do this is very difficult and very painful, but it is clearly involved in the notion of earnest love of truth.” In order to follow truth, one must be free to change.

Most of the essays in this collection were published in Restoration Review, Ensign, THE EXAMINER, ONE BODY or Refreshing Waters. They are not all on the subject of change, but their challenge to restudy various aspects of our beliefs should bring about profitable change and growth.

In our freedom to change, let us be supportive of each other so as to encourage full growth in Christ.

Cecil Hook

July 17, 1990

Chapter 1

Free To Change

“When did you change?” “Why did you change?” These questions come to me from friends who learn of my changes from some of the traditional beliefs and practices of my upbringing in the Church of Christ.

Although my changes have not been sudden or dramatic and my experiences are not of wide interest, some review of factors that worked in bringing about my change of direction may make someone else aware of the choices he or she may take. It might help some discouraged person to find the peace and joy that can replace the oppressive feelings of guilt and insecurity.

Each of us has some private questions and misgivings about the beliefs and practices of the group with which we associate. We usually learn to live with these individual disagreements in order to conform and to be compatible. That is true in my case, but I met a challenge in 1958 that altered my thinking greatly. It caused me to see that something very fundamental was lacking in my understanding.

Seven years earlier, I had begun working with the small group of disciples in New Iberia, Louisiana down in the heart of “Cajun” country. We were blessed with numerous conversions; so probably half of the members in my midweek class were newer converts for whom I had been the chief instructor. We usually consider that we have the most mature — the “cream of the crop” — in a Wednesday evening class, but I learned something disappointing when I polled that class.

I have always considered an unsigned poll to be of great value for leaders to understand the people whom they are leading. The first question that I asked that class of 22 persons was: If you were to die now, do you think that you would be saved? The answers: 11 yes; 4 no; 7 undecided or equivocal. Fifty percent were confident; fifty percent were burdened with feelings of guilt! That insecurity was expressed in spite of the fact that all 22 in the class indicated that they prayed privately daily.

The facts revealed by that poll shocked me. These were the sincerest of disciples. They were “my product.” What had I been teaching them that made their faith so unsure? Why had they not found the peace and joy that Jesus offers? Evidently, I had not been offering them hope but only a chance of having it.

Even though I did not understand the cause of my failure, I did begin to emphasize hope, assurance, confidence, the comfort of the Scriptures, the strength that God gives us, and other such positive concepts. Yet I continued to emphasize the necessity of knowing all the right doctrines accurately, obeying each detail correctly, and fully accomplishing righteousness within through constant reform, dedication, and works. It was hard for me to see that I was undermining their confidence by my demands for accomplished righteousness through keeping all the details of what I interpreted to be a system of law. I was demanding a rightness by

sufficient law-keeping rather than a rightness being accounted, or imputed, to us because of our faith.

Years passed as I wrestled with this problem. At least, I began to open my mind for new possibilities of understanding. I began to read material written by men who were not content to repeat our simplistic slogans and arguments in order to stay in favor with everyone. According to my judgment, those writers were not always right, but they were not afraid to think and to challenge my thinking. I thank God for them.

Flowers In The Underbrush

In hacking my way through the underbrush of both traditional and acquired misunderstandings, I began to discover beautiful flowers of truth long hidden from me by my ignorance and misdirection. Each new discovery made me more eager to find the next one. Here is a list of many unexpected discoveries that I came upon in the next twenty-five years of struggle.

1. God's basic requirement is for us to love him and one another. That is simple enough, but we have complicated it into a tedious system of religion.
2. We are all sinners — always! Because of our faith, the grace of God counts us as though we were sinless. Rightness with God is never accomplished in us either by God or ourselves, but it is imputed, accounted, or credited to us.
3. The new covenant is neither a code of law, the New Testament Scriptures, nor a book.
4. The New Testament Scriptures are not “the faith once for all delivered to the saints.”
5. The entire New Testament writings are not gospel. They contain both gospel and doctrine/teaching. There is a difference between gospel and doctrine and also a difference between preaching and teaching.
6. We can be right doctrinally on most everything and still not be right in the things that count most.
7. All Biblical teachings are important, but they are not equally important. There are some weightier matters.
8. Even we who have discovered salvation by grace continue to try to answer questions about such matters as marriage and divorce, the role of women, and the qualification and role of elders by legal concepts.
9. If unity is by conformity, it is brain-dead. All true unity is in Christ where we accept each other in spite of diversity.
10. Our tradition has been to reject and try to convert all who differ from us doctrinally; so we have approached them on an adversary basis. To accept all believers as fellow disciples and to

try to mature their understanding on an accepting basis is more sensible, non-judgmental, and effective.

11. Rather than serving to unite, doctrinal confrontations tend to polarize extremes.

12. Being in fellowship with a person does not mean that we approve or endorse all that he teaches or practices.

13. Our unity is in Christ rather than in compatible doctrinal beliefs and practices.

14. The person who tries to bind his convictions on others is guilty of being divisive. He becomes a judge, not just discerning for his own conscience, but condemning others for what their consciences allow.

15. When we are saved, the Lord adds us to his universal church rather than to local congregations. We join local groups. That is the way we get into sectarian churches of Christ.

16. The very message that we have proclaimed, intended to promote unity, is divisive by its nature. We have proven by our many self-produced divisions that legalism, patternism, and restorationism make unity impractical, if not impossible.

17. Generally, our congregations are formed on the basis of doctrinal agreement rather than by people being drawn into association by love. So, when one of our number begins to disagree with the doctrinal stance, we find it hard to love him.

18. One may be in a sect without being sectarian. A person may be in a church which rejects others who are in Christ while he himself is non-judgmental and accepting of all who are in Christ. He does not allow himself to be limited by the exclusive attitude of the group. He has a non-sectarian spirit.

19. Generally, we in the Church of Christ have not been geared to convert others to Christ. We tend to find others who already believe in Jesus in other denominations and then we try to convert them to a different set of doctrines. Even our overseas missionaries (Bless them!) have done too much of that.

20. Preachers and elders are the two greatest causes of friction in our congregations. If we would let elders shepherd the flock instead of being authority figures, they would be removed from controversy. Everyone would love men who would be concerned with their personal problems, pray with them, and give them loving encouragement. When the role of the preacher is truly preaching (evangelism) instead of being a surrogate elder/pastor serving the needs and whims of a congregation, he will gain respect instead of criticism.

21. Few of our people ever learn of their heritage in the Stone-Campbell Movement. They feel that they are not influenced by their heritage. A person might as well deny the influence of his inherited genes as to think that his thinking is unaffected by his religious heritage. We can better understand ourselves by reading our history.

22. Our worship is not limited to five acts or to certain rituals performed in an assembly at specified times and in measured amounts. When we commit ourselves to God in Christ, our whole lives are offerings of worship.

23. Regrettably, most of us have had constant tensions related to our service in the church. Most of that problem is caused by our efforts to work in an organized congregational system where elders and committees assign the use of our gifts and resources. When we use our gifts in exercise of individual, private ministries, all that tension of trying to please a system is relieved.

24. Jesus assured us that his yoke/law is easy, that his burden is light, and that his commandments are not burdensome.

These colorful flowers bursting forth transformed my jungle path of darkness, fears, burdens, brambles, and bites into a fragrant, delightful way lighted with fulfilling love, joy, acceptance, and security.

About twenty-five years after the first poll was taken, and in my fifth year here, I polled another class. By this time I had begun proclaiming salvation by grace through faith, a grace that had to be accepted though not earned, and a faith which brought commitment which might fall far short of total accomplishment. Of the 48 present, 35 believed they would be saved if they died that night and 13 expressed uncertainty. That was still disappointing. The answers reflected an amount of resistance against my “new” message of salvation by grace instead of law. Some could not comprehend the possibility of salvation apart from law; hence, they had begun to denounce it.

As you can see, my change did not come abruptly. Neither did it come as a reaction to some disillusionment causing me to want to abandon ship. In honesty with myself, I had to admit that my message was not accomplishing what it should. So, rather than trying to blame my hearers, I questioned my interpretation of the message and began to progress toward the solution. Much credit is given to a private study group devoted to learning the truth and accepting it regardless of the changes it might demand in our doctrinal beliefs and practices.

Ultimately, reaction against my changed message by sincere people in the congregation here produced much conflict. After ten years with this group, I resigned my preaching commitment with the church and took the janitorial work to supplement my Social Security income. That enabled me to retire. After several years of retirement, when Lea was able to draw Social Security benefits, we terminated the janitorial contract.

When we received our last paycheck from the church, even for janitorial work, we felt a freedom which we had never experienced before. We came to realize more than ever before that we had spent our career in helping to build and entrench an oppressive system of organized, sectarian religion. That system overpowers the life and conscience of the devotee and stifles the freedom of individual initiative in using the God-given talent. Through our developed system, the church supposedly became the route to heaven — a route of continual conflict and intimidated conscience — a route that bypasses Jesus at times.

Praise God, he was patient with me and permitted me to discover the flowers in the midst of the underbrush. Now I enjoy that peace that passes my understanding.

When did I change? It was a long, growing process. I am still changing. All of my beliefs are tentative — ready to be changed as I learn and understand the will of God better.

I am still free to change.

Chapter 2

Freedom And Responsibility

The root meaning of our English word *religion* is *to tie back; to bind again*. There is a basic connotation of restraint, restriction, oppression, and bondage which has prevailed, making our religion seem to be a burden to be borne instead of a source of strength to carry us.

Too many of us have labored under the concept that God wants to kill our spirits and subdue us as slaves by binding arbitrary laws. Even though God gave us the wonderful liberty to think, we have dedicated our minds to study and learn law so as to keep its jots and tittles in a rigidly programmed life.

When a person begins to speak of our liberties in Christ, it is perceived by some as rebellion. Those who have the spirit of bondage become fearful that we are throwing off all laws, regulations, requirements, and restrictions and are writing ourselves a license to do as we please.

All freedom has limitations and all bondage has some freedoms. In jail a prisoner has some liberties within the cell. We as free citizens know that there are countless federal, state, and local laws and regulations which limit our conduct. So it is in the spiritual realm. All liberties have corresponding responsibilities. It is for the irresponsible that laws, jails, and hell are made. Paul declared, "...the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient..." (1 Tim. 1:9). This passage also indicates that there is basic law that precedes and supersedes any and all codes of arbitrary law. A licentious society, whether it be a church or a nation, decays.

God gives us both the liberty and the responsibility to fulfill ourselves in the capacity that he assigns us in using the gifts with which he endows us. This is not accomplished through the keeping of a code of law. So, Paul urges, "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1).

When we begin to speak of freedom in Christ, some misunderstanding brothers begin to label us "liberal," a term about as bad as a curse word! You might have already noticed that I like the word "free"! I have titled my books as *Free In Christ*, *Free To Speak*, and *Free As Sons*. Some have asked what I will name my next book and I reply *Free From Church!* Well, maybe not. In view of all of our hangups, it is rather silly to brand anyone in the Church of Christ as liberal. A lady called me from another state and began talking of her situation. Then she paused and said, "I had better explain to you that I am an *anti*." Before she could tell me what kind of an *anti* she was confessing to be, I interrupted her, saying, "You don't have to tell me that you are an *anti*. Everyone in the Church of Christ is an *anti*. We are just opposed to different things."

Many of our people are now understanding that God wants us to be positive people seeking the fulfilled, abundant life, believing that God wants us to be happy. They know that he wants to lift our burden and carry our load so that we may rejoice in the Lord always. They are finding a religion where his yoke is easy, his burden is light, and his commandments are not grievous or burdensome. They are seeing the merciful character of God's directives — that laws were made for men rather than man being made for law. They are looking for mercy, grace, and comfort

from a loving shepherd instead of the tyranny of a demanding despot. They are enjoying a religion that *ties them back* to God and *binds them again* to the Father by a relationship in Christ rather than a religion that binds them as slaves by law.

Also, these liberated disciples understand that our works are not an effort to meet quotas, merit grace, or perform sacramental rituals. Our activities are designed to strengthen our faith, to up-build, to bear burdens, and to honor God — in short, to love God and man. They have accepted grace that freed them from the multitude of the distressed, repressed, depressed, and oppressed. They had found little comfort or security in our system which demands doctrinal correctness and human achievement for justification. But really, we are not trying to be free from other hurting disciples. We are free to grow beyond the immature and resistant brothers but not to abandon them or show them disrespect.

Paul was the champion of our liberty in Christ. When the Jewish disciples were binding circumcision and the law on all converts, he confronted the apostles and the whole church in Jerusalem to keep us free from such demands. In further dealing with this issue in Galatians and Romans, he confirmed that we are liberated from works of law, from the scruples of the weak brother, and from the judgment of fellow disciples.

Paul won his case, but he would not do so at the loss of his brothers in Christ. So he made concessions to show his pure motive and his love for all. After proving that Titus needed not to be circumcised, he circumcised Timothy because of the Jews. Paul kept rituals of the law to promote peace. He would not eat meat before the scrupulous vegetarian. He demonstrated that he was not just itching for a fight but that he was trying to save people. Concessions can be made without compromising principles. Unfortunately, those who recognize their liberties in Christ usually have to make all the concessions. The sincere legalist feels that any concession is a compromise of truth. You and I must swallow our pride and accept this responsibility lest we be divisive.

Paul does not allow us to reject a brother because of his different convictions unless they destroy the basis of the gospel like the denial of the resurrection would do.

Paul demands respect for the scrupulous, weak brother. In Romans 14, he does not permit us to condemn, despise, consider lightly, disdain, or look with contempt upon a brother. There must be no condescending, patronizing attitude. We do well to become aware of the put-downs that creep into our vocabulary as we address those who differ. When we refer to a priest as one who wears his collar backwards and dresses like mother but wants to be called Father, we are slamming the door by our contempt. I don't think I will have much of a positive influence on my black brother if say something like, "I love you niggers and count you as my brothers in Christ, but I think you are wrong on this point." In times past we deeply resented the Baptists who tantalized us by calling us "Campbellites." I have always been turned off by anyone calling me a "Church of Christer" or a "Church of Christ Christian" for I did not consider myself as either. And one does not gain any points with me by insisting that I am a member of the "Church of Christ Church" or the "AMI Church of Christ" ("Anti-Musical Instrument Church of Christ") Neither do I consider myself to be an "*anti*" or a "*liberal*."

Sincere argumentation to show that any of those terms apply to me is entirely different from using them as derisive, disparagements. Argumentation presented humbly is an appeal to my reasoning, but insensitivity is a door slammer arousing my emotions. Let us be sensitive of those we love in Christ. Let us not be combative. From some of the material that I read, I conclude that the writer is eager for a fight. Let us be easy to love and easy to get along with, never rejecting others even though they reject us.

In freeing ourselves from the tyranny of specific oppressive congregational systems, we cannot free ourselves from the need of continued congregational fellowship. The Lord knows that we need people and people need us. So there is legitimate purpose for assemblies. No assembling group is perfect; so there is need for continual reformation. Let us not alienate ourselves needlessly so that we can no longer be effective in giving redirection.

I have dreamed of forming a group of “my kind of people” with whom I can be comfortable in association without having to cope with the organized system of the local church with its bad-spirited people. But how could I justify such a thing? Inspired writers never advised disciples to leave unwholesome situations, even as existed in Corinth, in order to start a “true church.” Every child of God is “my kind of people” whom I must love and accept “warts and all.” I am called upon, not to start a new group of selected friends, but to bear and forbear and to exercise diligence to maintain the unity of God’s people. Starting another “one, true church” only adds to our long list of sectarian divisions.

In saying the above, I recognize that one rule cannot apply to all because different factors are involved in different situations. In some cases, congregations reject anyone who expresses a new idea. They cast him or her out. But let us be sure that there is no ugliness of spirit on our part when that happens to us. Our freedom does not allow that.

In gaining our liberty from the yoke of law, we are still obligated to keep the law of Christ. Those who are free are never exempt from the debt to love one another and to accept all brothers even when we disagree. Our true freedom is to be guided by the highest and most comprehensive of all laws — to love God and to love our fellowman.

In concluding, I would commend to you the wonderful attitude and practice of Paul, the great champion of our freedom. He wrote: “For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law — though not being myself under the law — that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law — not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ — that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings” (1 Cor. 9:19f).

And this, to that same problem-filled Corinthian church: “I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together. I have great confidence in you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with comfort. With all our affliction, I am overjoyed” (2 Cor. 7:2f).

Chapter 3

My Kind Of People

“I have few true friends with whom I can really relax” is a statement that you have made unless you are more outgoing and socially accepting than most of us. I like to be with “my kind of people.” Although this is usually quoted to imply evil associations, “Birds of a feather flock together” expresses the universal inclination to be with people who are most like us.

Social comfort with only those of our own nature does not recognize what true friendship is, nor does it demonstrate the attitude that Jesus would have in his society of believers. True friends love each other in spite of their differences. They accept us “warts and all” with a charity that transcends petty preferences and chasms of convictions.

God erased distinctions in Christ. There are no groupings any more, for all are one in Christ. Preferences of race, age, sex, nationality, culture, and degree of spiritual maturity no longer exist in the body. They are all my kind of people. While it is true that these distinctions all still exist, they are not barriers to acceptance by God or his disciples. We must look, feel, and identify across those lines even as Christ does.

I have been in a private study group with my kind of people and that was a wonderful experience. It served a special need which made it expedient. I have thought how nice it would be to start a new, undenominational group of that kind of select people where we could all be comfortable with each other.

In this community, there are several reform groups whose intent was to restore pure Christianity. Being drawn together because of their likeness of mind, they felt a comfort with each other. However, unintentional as it might be, they attract only others who are compatible. It becomes a matter of, “If you are our kind, come with us.” Thus, an exclusiveness is inherent in the plan. There is the underlying desire to be with those who agree with us so that no conflict will have to be dealt with which calls for the virtue of forbearance. These people easily become impatient and overbearing with those who pose some threat to their complacent society.

The chief factor for determining our kind of people has usually been doctrinal agreement. If you agree, or if we can convert you to our set of doctrines, you are our kind. Thus, we continue to divide into sectarian groups of our differing kinds.

It is true that, in order to have sharing, fellowship, mutual participation, or communion, we must have a basis of commonality. What is that basis? How do we identify these people?

They are disciples of Jesus. Being followers and learners, they will necessarily be at different points along the road to perfection.

They are those in Christ. He unites all in himself. That is not our doing. We just accept it and live with it. The oneness is created by the Spirit. We cannot separate into kinds as though different spirits led us through baptisms of choice into selective bodies through various systems

of faith offering different goals set before us by particular lords and gods. God's purpose was to unite all things in him in one body, and that is what he has done and continues to do. (Please read Ephesians 1:3-10; 4:1-6 again.)

Those who are our kind are ignorant, erring, immature people who are trying to follow Jesus. They love but are not perfect in love. They do not all excel in morality. In sanctification, most are far from being models. Yet, they are sanctified in and by Christ. Through his grace he put his arms around us all, pulled us out of hopelessness, and accepted us as though we were perfect. That's my kind of people!

I am not arguing against our having individual friendships as long as they do not breed exclusiveness.

It would be more appealing and expressive of our purposes to replace our Church of Christ signs with something like Support Gatherings for Disciples. Isn't that what our meetings should be? Isn't the church a support group for those on heaven's journey? A support group does not limit admission to labels, grades, or degrees of conformity, but they are an embracing people who identify with the needs of each other and help to supply what is lacking in areas of deficiency. They worship their Lord but are not a worshipping society. They meet for the good they receive from the gatherings rather than to demonstrate acceptable piety by the frequency of their participation or the meeting of other quotas. They are traveling toward heaven but do not claim to be the route. These are my kind of people!

Such disciples welcome one another with a love that covers a multitude of sins; yet when that love is lacking, they still forbear with one another. I hope that they can say that I am their kind of people!

Chapter 4

“Come Out And Be Separate!”

The plea to “come out from them and be separate from them” is being urged upon us with renewed passion since some of our people have been meeting with others of the Restoration Movement to discuss unity. This warning is coming from persons who fear compromise. The one calling for separation implies that he is with a group which has all the truth. If one thinks that he is right about everything, he cannot unite with someone who differs without compromising his own convictions. So he develops a spirit of exclusiveness which demands that he separate from all who differ from him in belief or practice.

...On the other hand, others are calling out, “Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Rom. 15:7). They point out that Paul called upon us to receive one another in spite of differences of conviction and practice about such things as circumcision, eating of meats, and keeping of days.

Accept or separate from — which shall it be? Does this put us in a contradictory dilemma? Are there some fine lines of distinction that we hair-splitting scribes must detect and observe? If so, how treacherous the path to life becomes!

When Paul calls upon us to welcome (receive, accept) one another, he is including all our sincere brothers in Christ — even the weakest of them. He forbids that we judge them regarding their particular scruples and practices. Paul does not even grant us the luxury of looking upon a brother with contempt.

How should we accept each other? “As Christ has welcomed you!” Brother or sister, even though I do not know you, I do know that Christ did not accept you because you are so good, so right on everything, so loveable, and so perfect in all aspects. He accepted me when I was sinful, ignorant, misdirected, and lacking in every aspect. And I have not grown out of that state. Since he accepts me while I am a sinner, poor, weak, and blind, how can I have the audacity to reject others because of the same qualities?

To advise disciples to separate from others who are in Christ is to work against Jesus’ prayer for unity. In addressing the seven churches of Asia with all their threatening problems, Jesus urged none to “come out from among them and be separate” by starting a pure, loyal church. Rather, they were warned to repent and reform. In the “dead” church in Sardis there were “a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy” (Rev. 3:4). Like Lot in the midst of corrupt Sodom, a person may be a part of a sinful society and still remain righteous (1 Pet. 2:7). One may be in a congregation without approving or participating in the prevalent sins of others in it. One cannot separate himself from sinful people entirely but he is guilty only of the sins that he practices or approves. One may be in a division without being divisive, or in a sect without being sectarian in spirit. In none of the epistles was one group advised to separate from the rest within the church. Such advice today is both unscriptural and anti-scriptural. There is no such thing as a congregation of the “one, true, pure church” to join. All groups are flawed.

When Paul resounded the Lord's warning to "come out from them, and be separate from them," he was quoting Old Testament demands for separation from idolatrous involvements. In this passage (2 Cor. 6:14-18) Paul is demanding, "Do not be mismatched with unbelievers." He asks rhetorically, "What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols?" Paul is not calling for separation from brothers in Christ but from the Corinthian idolaters whose licentious worship at the temple of Venus, supported by prostitute priestesses, would be a temptation to the disciples.

What a sickened spirit it is that allows one to treat his own brothers in Christ as idolaters! Is the brother in the Christian Church who obeyed the same gospel that you obeyed to be regarded as an though he were an idolater? Even though you may fear that a Baptist is in some error, must you classify him as an unbeliever or a servant of Belial? If he is not a believer, what is he? Is he a pagan, a Buddhist, or an atheist? He is serving the same Jesus whom you serve. And those disciples in the Church of Christ (even in your own congregation) who differ from you in belief and practice — how do you classify them? If you demand separation from them, then you imply that they are as unbelievers and idolaters.

Paul says welcome, but Diotrophes says put them out! "He refuses himself to welcome the brethren, and also stops those who want to welcome them and puts them out of the church" (3 John 9f). Do you stand with Paul or Diotrophes?

Teachers who would create dissensions were to be noted and avoided (Rom. 16:17f). In Chapters 14 and 15 Paul had already taught them how to live in unity through mutual acceptance. No one was to be allowed to operate contrary to that doctrine by imposing his scruples on others so that division would be created. Those who were disturbing the unity in Rome were not sincere, ignorant, weak disciples, but they were selfishly licentious Judaizers. Paul identifies them further in the Philippian epistle (1:15; 3:2; 3:18f). The perverted and sinful factious man (Titus 3:10) was to be ignored. The Thessalonian disciples were told to keep away from the deadbeat who would not work (2 Thess. 3:6-13). In dealing with these believers, Paul advised no withdrawal into separate congregations.

"Drive out the wicked person from among you," Paul instructs (1 Cor. 5:13). This action was not advised against any sincere brother who might hold some different ideas or practices, but it was toward the arrogantly immoral person among them. Read the entire chapter. Is this a directive for us to drive out our brothers in the Christian Church as a group? Are they to be considered as flagrantly immoral, greedy, idolaters, revilers, drunkards, or robbers? Even the Baptists are not that bad!

In this passage, Paul is dealing with a brother, not a church. No inspired writer ever advised one group of disciples to reject another group and start a separate one. Brothers are not to be dealt with as though they were idolaters.

Jesus prayed that we be one. The Spirit made us one. Paul begs us to keep that unity and says "welcome one another!" Do you demand that we divide from our brothers who differ?

Chapter 5

Private Interpretation

The radio preacher assured us that the speakers on his program would give us only the simple Bible message without any interpretation. They would just teach the Scriptures without giving us a private interpretation. That sounds great, doesn't it?

Every English version of the Bible is an interpretation of God's message delivered originally in the ancient languages of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. The translations are interpretations made by uninspired men.

The message of the Bible is conveyed through symbols which must be interpreted to be of value. First, letters of our alphabet are symbols which make up words which are more complex symbols. The illiterate person does not know what letters and words symbolize; hence, he cannot understand a written message. If one cannot interpret the symbols, that person cannot gain the message.

When a person reads the Scriptures aloud to others, that person is interpreting the character symbols into words which symbolize meanings, ideas, and concepts. If a person hears those words ever so clearly but does not know their meaning, he or she has not profited. There must be an interpretation in order to bring understanding. If the speaker reads the words that produce no understanding, he is wasting his time.

Many speakers have denounced persons who would attempt to interpret the Scriptures. Yet, those speakers never confine their activity to the simple reading of the Bible. They always offer comments. Those comments are an effort to enable the hearer to understand. That is interpreting the Scriptures!

This aversion to interpreting the Scriptures comes from a misunderstanding (misinterpretation!) of 2 Peter 1:20f where Peter declares, "First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." In this setting, Peter is assuring us that we do not follow cleverly devised myths when we accept the account of the eyewitnesses of his majesty or the messages revealed to prophets of the Lord. Those prophets did not depend upon their own interpretation of events which they witnessed or put their own construction on the messages revealed to them. They received revelations of truth from God being moved by the Holy Spirit. None of us receive such revelations today.

So, we have the prophetic word made more sure. But we still must understand what those prophets wrote for it to benefit us. That understanding can come only through our interpreting the words which they left us.

Even though all of us have the same prophetic word today, all of us do not understand it alike. All of us can welcome explanations from others even as the Ethiopian nobleman did when Philip

asked him, “Do you understand what you are reading?” Our reply should be like his, “How can I, unless some one guides me?”

There are two consolations. First, our salvation is not dependent upon a correct interpretation and understanding of all of God’s word. Second, even though we may profit from the interpretations of persons more schooled in the Scriptures than we are, we are not obligated to accept their interpretations.

Chapter 6

A “Monkey-Wrench” Scripture

On the farm as I was growing up we had few wrenches for our implements, but we needed few. Our tool set consisted mostly of a monkey wrench. In those olden days our simple implements were put together with bolts and square-headed nuts, and a monkey wrench could be adjusted to fit any size of nut.

In the times of my youth there was much argumentation by sincere people about matters of religion. Many of our issues were rather simplistically square-headed (or maybe we were the square-headed nuts!). A Scripture reference that seemed to be adjustable to fit all issues was 2 John 9: “Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son” (KJV).

This proof-text was used to condemn the use of individual communion glasses, a second serving of the Lord’s Supper on Sunday night, the use of wine in the Lord’s Supper, Bible school classes, women teachers, uninspired literature, women cutting their hair, women worshipping unveiled, collection trays, instrumental accompaniment to singing in assemblies, indoor baptistries, eating in the church building, church sponsored children’s homes, youth ministers, and most anything else that a person might be inclined to be cantankerous about. None of these were taught by Christ or his apostles.

The application of this “monkey wrench” Scripture escalated the most insignificant and immaterial details into life-or-death matters, and I fear that they brought more death than life. According to the argumentation, when people practiced any of these things which was not taught by Christ, they thereby abandoned God and Christ. Such an offender “hath not God!” Those who stalwartly refused such innovations enjoyed the assurance that “He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son.” A brother who went beyond the teaching of Christ in any of these matters was not to be bidden God speed or received into one’s house, according to verse 10, “For he that biddeth him God speed is a partaker of his evil deeds.”

Based upon a misunderstanding of 2 John 9-10, and bolstered by other passages, we developed a popular slogan which declared, “We speak where the Bible speaks and we are silent where the Bible is silent.” We proposed to do all and only those things which were specified or exemplified, while our failure to follow our motto was glaring.

Here are some of the practices that we have ignored or “explained away” plus some that we have added. The church was begun and nurtured by men exercising special spiritual gifts, including the speaking in tongues. Women wore veils while praying and prophesying (teaching) in the assemblies. 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 for a horizontal outreach than a vertical up-reach. In their gatherings, they prayed, sang, communed, and enjoyed fellowship meals. The model church in Jerusalem held possessions in common, and the only collections that we read of were for the poor and for evangelism. In the first church, many met in homes. 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,” a membership roll, the class system of teaching, hymnals, or four-part harmony.

It is clearly evident that none of our congregations practice all of those things that the early church practiced and none of our churches have limited themselves to what was exemplified in the New Testament record. It is of some blessing that the application of this “monkey wrench” scripture was made only selectively, else all insignificant details would have been screwed down so tightly that we could not have operated.

Since I sort of inherited that traditional argumentation and it seemed so right to me, I made similar application of that text during much of my ministry. After many years, however, I could no longer honestly ignore the contextual meaning and continue to use it as a proof-text as before.

What is the doctrine of Christ to which John refers? Doctrine and teaching are words of identical meaning — synonyms. The language allows two possible meanings of “the doctrine or teaching of Christ.” It could mean the doctrine which Christ taught, or it could mean the doctrine about Christ. Which is the correct meaning?

There is much in John’s writings which deals with the Gnostic influence among the early disciples. Among other things, they denied that Christ came in the flesh. In verse 7, John warns, “For many deceivers have gone into the world, men who will not acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh; such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist” (RSV). This is definitely speaking of the teaching about Christ. Such antichristian teaching would separate one from God and Christ, for the incarnation is a fundamental upon which our faith rests. John was not referring to their ignoring of some law or commandment, much less to the practice of some scrupulous detail as we have listed earlier. There is a vast difference in the gravity of denying that Christ came in the flesh and such scruples as those about women teaching children in Bible classes. Inviting her into your house and bidding her God speed is not comparable to encouraging one who went about denying that Christ came in the flesh.

After half a century of enlightenment since the discussion by our sincere, uneducated farm neighbors, it seems that we would no longer hear this “monkey wrench” scripture used as before. But, to our dismay, we still hear the old cliché arguments put forward — but selectively, of course. None who rely on this proof-text dares to make a general application of it. It is a convenient tool adjusted to condemn what the particular teacher has scruples against but has insufficient evidence from the Scriptures to condemn.

These thoughts in no way imply disrespect for Jesus’ teachings or those of the inspired writers. This is a plea for honesty in the application of their teachings.

Chapter 7

The Truth That Frees

Jesus told his followers, “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32). What is that liberating truth? Is it the Bible? Is it the New Testament writings? Is it just the gospel? Is it simply the “plan of salvation”? Is it Christ’s law?

It is none of the above! Although the Bible is true, Jesus was not pointing them to a book to be written and compiled at some time in the future. Jesus was not talking about a set of facts, a code of law, or a system of doctrine; he had only one truth in mind.

And from what would the truth free them?

In order to find the answer to these questions, one need not belabor himself with commentaries, lexicons, and the deliberations of the scholars. A reading of the context of this much-quoted passage, which includes the second quadrant of the gospel of John, can give us the simple answer. Let us scan it briefly to see.

Jesus was going about teaching and performing miracles in order to create faith that he was the Son of God, yet he was being cautious not to arouse a peak of opposition before his hour should come. As Jesus was gaining public attention and popularity among the people, the chief priests and Pharisees were stirring up opposition. In the setting of John 7-8, we see the controversy intensify. Jesus testified of his relation to the Father who sent him. He was to identify himself as the Savior: “I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he” (John 8:24). They would be in bondage to their sins as long as they did not believe “I am he” — that is, that he was the Christ sent from God.

Although Jesus had done many convincing works among them, he had not given the ultimate demonstration of his Sonship. So he also declared, “When you have lifted up the Son of man, then you will know that I am he” (8:28).

What is the truth that they would know? It was the answer to the great controversy — whether he was the Christ sent from the Father. The uplifted Jesus was declared to be the Son of God with power (Rom. 1:4). In a short time, both believers and those who opposed would be able to know that liberating truth.

When those disciples heard him speak of their being set free, they protested that they had never been in bondage. Then Jesus made it clear that it was their bondage to sin that would be relieved. The whole world still awaited an atonement.

It should be noted that Jesus stated positively and without condition that “you will know” and “the truth will make you free.” The disciples were Jewish law-keepers who already believed in Jesus. This promise applied to them uniquely and was fulfilled in that they became witnesses of the resurrection which enabled them to know that he was the Son of God and they were freed

from sin without further condition because “when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law...” (Gal.4:4).

Avoiding any hint that he was speaking of a body of teaching instead of himself as a person, Jesus assured the disciples, “So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed” (8:36). He is the Truth who frees. A code of law, factual truths, defined doctrines, and rules of conduct have no power to break the bondage of sin, and no complicated system of either of these must be mastered in order for one to gain his forgiveness.

We, too, are enabled to know the Truth and to be freed by him, for later, in his prayer, Jesus said, “And this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent” (17:3).

While we are brought to the liberating Jesus by the gospel and we are directed in the exercise of freedom in him by the apostolic teachings, it is to the Son of God rather than to a system of true teachings that we owe our freedom from both sin and law.

If we must know and understand all facts recorded in the Bible, we are hopeless. I have quoted, “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free,” countless times thinking that I had a system of truth fairly well defined. I was trying to convert others to a body of truth or system of doctrine more than to Christ. Often addressing those who already believed in Jesus, I sought to convince them of a code of law which I thought they had failed to recognize and understand. But I was the one who needed more insight. Jesus rebuked me along with others like me in his day: “You search the scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness of me; yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life” (5:39).

In a related but secondary sense, they were unconditionally freed from the slavery to law. Law and sin are closely related, for it is law that brings sin. While law brings sin, it has no remedy to free those under its dominion.

To impose a system of teaching as a code of law is to enslave rather than to free. Law is “a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear” (Acts 15:10). Jesus brought freedom from both law and its consequential sin, “For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace” (Rom. 6:14). “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1).

I have often declared that truth frees us and that error cannot do what truth does. In some sense, that is true, but I was setting error as the opposite of truth, while Satan is the opposite of Truth — one personage opposing another. When I am in Christ, I am in the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and Satan cannot snatch me out of his hand.

The truth that frees us from sin is that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Chapter 8

Literary Devices

Language is a means of communication by symbolic sounds and graphics. The meaning of these symbols is affected by the use of literary devices which further enhance, illuminate, and embellish them. Effective speakers and writers have always made good use of literary devices and accommodative language. Jesus and other spokesmen for God filled their language with figures of speech.

Many of the literary devices in the Scriptures are easy to recognize; yet some may be too subtle for us unless we are more familiar with the language style and idiom of the time of the writers. To illustrate this, we may think of the student two thousand years from now trying to understand our expressions. He may not be able to comprehend what we meant by a backup forward on a basketball team, plastic glasses, an iron curtain, a third world country, or an airplane that lands on water. He may be puzzled that we park in a driveway and drive in a parkway or that we pay a toll on a freeway. He may conclude that two planes involved in a near miss collided. He might not comprehend how a house could burn up and burn down at the same time.

Trying to avoid the negative feelings that you might have had toward your high school English classes, let us take note of some literary devices in the Scriptures which may add surprising illumination to certain texts. A full exploration of this field would fill a book; we shall look at only a few selected passages some of which have been misunderstood due to more literal interpretation.

Ellipsis

Persons who downplay the importance of baptism have often quoted “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel” (1 Cor. 1:17) to teach that Paul did not consider baptism as either being important or a part of the gospel. While we could show from other references that Paul did emphasize the importance of baptism, we have seldom recognized the literary device that Paul used here.

An ellipsis is an abridging, shortening, or omitting by leaving out words that are understood to be in the sentence. We say, “I know (that) you are leaving,” or “(You) come here.” So, in view of this device, Paul is saying, “Christ sent me not (only) to baptize, but (also) to preach the gospel.”

Of the numerous other illustrations of this, I shall list a few here. “You have not lied to men (only) but (also) to God” (Acts 5:4). “Little children, let us not love in word or speech (only) but (also) in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18). “Do not labor (only) for the food which perishes, but (also, or more importantly) for the food which endures to eternal life” (John 6:27). “For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will (only), but (also, or more importantly) the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38).

In these elliptical statements, the negative clause is minimized and the positive clause is emphasized. Paul did recognize that preaching the gospel was more important in his mission than merely baptizing people.

Sarcasm

Sarcasm involves a cutting humor in which the user may actually say the opposite of what he means. After a series of disastrous football games, one may remark, “What a super team we have! They are headed for the Superbowl!”

In the Corinthian church, some Spiritually endowed persons were distressing the congregation by subjecting it to speeches in foreign languages. God might know what the speaker was saying but none in his audience had any idea of it; so Paul quipped, “For one who speaks in a tongue speaks not unto men but to God; for no one understands him, but he utters mysteries in the Spirit” (1 Cor. 14:2). The man was building up himself like the Pharisee praying on the street corner instead of building up the church by language that they could understand. So Paul cuts deeper in verse four: “He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church.” (Also a pun on edifies!)

Feel Paul’s incisive humor as he undercuts Jewish bigotry, “We ourselves, who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners” (Gal 2:15). Also, “I wish those who unsettle you would mutilate themselves!” (5:12). Slashing at the Judaistic fondness of their distinctive mark of circumcision, a cutting of the male parts, Paul is sneering, “Why don’t you go ahead and emasculate yourselves?”

Rebuking the Corinthian disciples for following divisive leaders who evidently claimed to be apostles, Paul cuts them with, “For if some one comes and preaches another Jesus than the one we preached, or you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you submit to it readily enough. I think that I am not in the least inferior to these superlative apostles” (2 Cor. 11:4). He continues in verse 19, “For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! For you bear it if a man makes slaves of you, or preys upon you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face. To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that!”

In each of the cases mentioned here, Paul’s sarcasm probably brought some embarrassed laughter.

Satire

The nature of satire overlaps with sarcasm and hyperbole. Satire is a literary work holding up human vices and follies to ridicule or scorn.

To appreciate Jesus’ wit in the use of satire, one has only to read Matthew 23. His denunciation of the Pharisees is caustic, cutting, and humorous. Hear him: “Observe what they tell you, but not what they do!” “They lift heavy burdens to put on others then won’t lift their finger to relieve them.” He sneered at their love for titles and status. They searched to make proselytes only to

make them twice as much children of hell as they themselves were. Blind guides! Silly oaths. In their inconsistency, they strained out the gnats while swallowing camels. They washed the outside of the cup instead of the inside. They whitewashed tombs of decay to hide reality. They honored prophets while killing them! No doubt, this caustic ridicule of their follies brought both embarrassed laughter and steaming anger from the listeners. Talk about Aggie jokes; Jesus was full of Pharisee jokes! However, Jesus limited such caustic satire to the hypocritical leaders instead of using it to embarrass humble truth seekers.

Hyperbole

A hyperbole is an evident exaggeration for the sake of emphasis. It might be witty also. These are common in our conversations like when we say, “The room was so cold that I froze to death,” or “He turned as white as a sheet.”

We might well visualize Jesus talking to his disciples about wealth where a tentmaker was working and a rich man was passing by on a camel when he declared in exaggerated terms, “For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God!” (Luke 18:25).

John, in impressing us that he covered Jesus’ life story so inadequately, declared, “But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.” (John 21:25).

In an overstatement to make his point, Paul wrote, “I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you.” (2 Cor. 11:8)

Perhaps we can better interpret Jesus’ statement as a hyperbole: “If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 4:27).

Jesus’ suggestion that a person might try to pick the speck out of someone’s eye when he had a beam in his own would combine the wit and ridicule of both satire, sarcasm, and hyperbole.

Play on Words - The Pun

A pun is a humorous use of a word in such a way as to suggest different meanings and applications such as when Jesus told the disciples, “Let the dead bury the dead” (Matt. 8:22).

Jesus used this device when he declared, “You are Peter (which means rock), and on this rock I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18).

Paul used a word four times for effect. “I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus (useful, beneficial), whose father I have become in my imprisonment. (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and me.)” (Philemon 10f; 20). “Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord.”

Notice Peter's play on word: "Likewise you wives, be submissive to your husbands, so that some, though they do not obey the word, may be won without a word (from the wife!)" (1 Peter 3:1).

Paradox

A paradox consists of two statements expressing an apparent contradiction, such as "He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matt. 10:39). Again, "So the last will be first, and the first last." (Matt. 10:16). And another, "For to him who has will more be given; and from who has not, even what he has will be taken away." (Mark 4:25). A paradox challenges deeper thought on the matter.

Allusion

An allusion is an indirect reference in passing to something familiar in history. Our songs, employ many of them. For instance, "Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah," makes many allusions to the wilderness experiences of Israel.

When we read, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (Heb. 13:2), our thoughts are directed back to the time when Abraham entertained the angels. Also consider "Remember Lot's wife."

When Jesus said, "The slave does not continue in the house forever; the son continues forever" (John 8:35), he was referring back to the incident when Sarah drove Ishmael out.

Paul was pointing back to the Tabernacle and the Temple when he spoke of his body as a decaying tent which would be replaced by a permanent house (2 Cor. 5:1f).

In allusion, Jesus was the bread from heaven (manna), living water (which Moses brought from the rock), the lamb of God (sacrificial offering), the uplifted brazen serpent, our Passover, and many other figures which pointed to something familiar. Thus, allusions open the way for many typical comparisons and richer meanings. They invite historical study.

Metonymy

A metonymy is a figure of associated ideas in which the whole is put for the part, the part for the whole, the container for the thing contained, a substance for the thing made of it, or one thing is put for another closely associated with it. Let us note these separately.

1. The whole for the part. "Every creature/whole creation" is used for the human race. "All the world" may mean only a known area. "For all have sinned" surely would not include little children and mentally deficient persons. "He came to his own and they that were his own received him not" must be limited to a part for all did not reject him. "All flesh" may only mean some persons of differing races.

2. A part for the whole. Jesus explained that his Golden Rule “is the law and the prophets.” It only epitomized the message and intent of the law and the prophets. When James defines pure religion as visiting the needy and living morally clean lives, he was abridging the definition by putting a part for the whole.

Our salvation is attributed to numerous individual things like God, Christ, grace, the gospel, faith, works, confession, repentance, baptism, and faithfulness. When our salvation is attributed to any one of these, the other factors are not meant to be excluded, but the part is put for the whole in that instance in order to impress a certain factor being considered.

3. The container for what it contains. A cup is mentioned to indicate its contents. To pray to heaven is to pray to God who is in heaven. A family is spoken of as a house, which is a dwelling place for a family.

4. A substance for the thing made of it. “By the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.” Here flesh stands for the people of fleshly substance. We are dust, etc.

5. One word for another closely associated with it in meaning. “We walk (live) by faith, and not by sight (knowledge).” “Moses (the Law of Moses) is read in every synagogue.” “Breaking bread (eating food).”

Prolepsis

Sometimes two events separated by time are connected for explanatory purpose in such a way as to give the impression that they occurred at the same time. This is called a prolepsis.

Genesis 2:2-3 would indicate that the Sabbath was sanctified at that early time; however, it was not sanctified until centuries later (Exo. 20:8; Deut. 5:15).

In listing the apostles in Matthew 10:2-4, Matthew lists “Judas Iscariot, who also betrayed him,” but it was three years later that the betrayal took place.

Abraham is said to have built an altar at Bethel (Gen. 12:8), but Bethel was not so named until Jacob named it much later (Gen. 28:10-19). These details were written after the fact and the later piece of information was included for further explanation. Other information known by a later writer may be written into a historical account. Of Israel in their wilderness journey, it is written centuries later, “For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ” (1 Cor. 10:4). Also notice that Moses “considered abuse suffered for Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt” (Heb. 11:26). Those happenings preceded Christ by centuries.

During the intense excitement on Pentecost, it is unlikely that persons turned their attention away from the speakers long enough to make a survey to see how many nations were represented there at the time (Acts 2:5-11). It is more likely that someone gathered this information later and Luke injected it into his narrative as though the count was made at the time.

Simile

This is the simplest and most commonly used literary device. By use of the words as or like a similarity of one thing to another is expressed. “All flesh is as grass.” “He shall be like a tree.”

Only one example will be given special attention here. In Luke 22:44, it is recorded, “And his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground.” The simple comparison is that his sweat was so profuse that it flowed down in great drops as blood would do from a wounded person. But a mysticism seems to have attached itself to this expression so that it has been commonly interpreted that the sweat was like blood in color or nature. Bible students have gone to great lengths to give medical explanations of how sweat could absorb blood from the capillaries in time of trauma so as to fit this misinterpretation.

Didactic Simile or Parable

Extending the simile beyond a simple comparison, Jesus taught many parables. Most of his parables were about the nature of his kingdom and they carried one main point. Our misguided tendency has been to make some application of each thing mentioned in the extended comparison.

While we generally look upon parables as being given to illuminate the truth, that is not the purpose that Jesus gave for using them. When asked why he taught in parables, he explained, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but for others they are in parables, so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand” (Luke 8:10). Parables veiled the truth that Jesus could have spoken more plainly.

Metaphor

A metaphor is an abridged simile. It is a comparison omitting comparative words like as or like. In a metaphor one person or thing is said to be another person or thing, like “all flesh is grass.” There is wide usage of metaphors.

God is said to be a shield, a rock, a fortress, a builder, a dwelling-place, etc.

Jesus is said to be a lamb, a shepherd, a door, a vine, a cornerstone, etc.

The saved are said to be a temple, a body, a household, a bride, a kingdom, etc.

We have no trouble with metaphors except where mysticism has warped our thinking as in the case where Jesus said of the bread they were eating and the wine they were drinking, “This is my body” and “This is my blood.” He just failed to use a comparative word which would have made similes instead of metaphors.

Allegory

An allegory is a sustained analogy, a prolonged metaphor in which mention of the principal subject or lesson is suppressed. Nathan's story about the sheep told to David is a classic allegory of the Old Testament (2 Sam. 12:1-6). In the New Testament, Paul describes his analogy of the two women as an allegory (Gal. 4:21-31).

It is my belief that the account of the Rich Man and Lazarus is allegoric. You may read about that in another chapter of this book.

Symbol

A symbol is a representation. It is something that stands for or suggests something else. Consider the cherubim and the flaming sword and the details of the description of heaven. The rainbow is a token of God's covenant with Noah even as circumcision represented God's covenant with Abraham. The cross is a symbol of Christ's atonement and baptism is symbolic of our death and resurrection with Christ. There are many others.

Prophetic language was usually highly symbolic in nature. As with parables, the insiders could understand the message while it would be veiled to the outsiders, for the insiders would know the key of the representations. We have no one to give us the key to the complex figures in prophetic literature like Revelation today; therefore, I am convinced that no one is able to explain them adequately. Surely, Spirit filled men were able to explain the representations to the people in the early church to whom the writing applied particularly. They were sustained through the persecutions depicted in the figurative language by that knowledge, thus Revelation fulfilled its chief purpose in them.

Emblem

An emblem is a tangible object used to represent a moral or spiritual quality, like a crown for royalty, a scepter for sovereignty, a mountain for rule, or a heavenly body for a ruler. Jesus chose bread as a representation of his body and wine as an emblem of his blood.

Type

A type is a shadow whose substance (antitype) is in the future. Both the type and antitype are real persons, things, offices, or events. Here are examples of:

Persons: The first and second Adam (1 Cor. 15:45).

Things: The tabernacle and the true tabernacle (church) (Heb. 8-9).

Offices: Melchizedek and Christ (Heb. 5).

Events: Israel's deliverance and ours (1 Cor. 10:1-11).

Parallelism

By reading the scriptures in more modern versions, we are impressed that much poetry is used, especially in the writings of David, Solomon, and the prophets. Jesus used some poetic lines.

A favorite device among the Jews was the parallelism in which a thought is repeated in meaning in a second line of a couplet. Here are two balanced parallelisms of Jesus:

“For nothing is hid that shall not be made manifest, Nor anything secret that shall not be known and come to light” (Luke 8:17).

“What I tell you in the dark, utter in the light; What you hear whispered, proclaim upon the housetops.” (Matt. 10:27).

In the inverted parallelism, the first and fourth lines are related while the second and third lines are parallels and supplement the first. See Matt. 11:29-30; Isa. 5:20-21. There are many different arrangements of these parallel thoughts.

Accommodative Language

Some Biblical language is not accurate in a literal, scientific sense. It accommodated the concepts of hearers who lacked in scientific knowledge. So we read of the four corners of the earth, of the sun and rising and going down, of heaven being up, and of hell being down. The center of desire was thought to be the kidneys (reins in KJV) and compassion was thought to be in the bowels (bowels of compassion in KJV). Because ancient people thought that persons with mental disorders were possessed of demons, some students of the Bible suppose that the speaking of casting out evil spirits was an accommodative way of saying that Jesus was healing those mental disorders.

Recognizing Figurative Language

1. Consider the context to see if a literal or figurative interpretation is necessary to make sense. Jesus said that we are the salt of the earth. We need not relate that to Lot’s wife, the covenant of salt, sowing a conquered city with salt, or the use of salt as a preservative. Jesus indicated that he was speaking of a flavoring influence.
2. Some literal interpretations would present an impossibility. The dead cannot bury the dead. When Jesus said, “This is my body,” he could not have been holding his own body in his hands. A literal snake is not an intelligent, hearing, talking, scheming creature like that depicted in Eden.
3. We should not consider a thing to be literal if it presents a contradiction such as God’s being represented as having eyes, ears, face, hands, and finger. These are anthropomorphisms accommodating man’s physical concepts. God is spirit and spirit has not flesh and bones (Lk. 24:49).

4. When it is said to be figurative like the parables of Jesus or the allegory of Paul, there is no question about it. However, we have not been inclined to accept Paul's accommodative adaptation to the Corinthians. He rebuked them for divisively following different men like Paul, Apollos, Cephas, or Christ. Then he later explains that he had applied this to himself and Apollos figuratively for a lesson. He was putting the names of uninvolved persons in place of the guilty ones. (Consider 1 Cor. 1:12-13; 4:6; 2 Cor. 11:13).

In Conclusion

I have been selective in my coverage of literary devices used in the Scriptures for the sake of brevity and in order to offer help in understanding certain passages. This is a broad field which I am not qualified to cover fully. I hope that the points touched on will make your reading of the Book more fascinating and understandable.

Chapter 9

The Fear of God

My father moved his family to the virgin soil in West Texas. With a grubbing hoe and a double bitted axe he cleared the heavy mesquite trees. The mesquite supplied our needs for firewood during my upbringing. He could wield that axe with accuracy and force.

As a first generation American, he was austere and a hard- working man. Even though he gave himself untiringly in providing for us, he never told me that he loved me or gave me a hug. When we disobeyed him, we were in awe of his displeasure and shrank from his discipline.

Even though I feared when I disobeyed him, I was never in fear of his axe. I had an overall sense of acceptance as a son and was supported by his unexpressed love. Never once did I fear that he might want to destroy me with his axe.

In those times, safety razors and electric shavers had not come into use. My father shaved himself with the usual straight razor which had to be strapped regularly in order to keep it sharp. His double thonged strap hung on a nail on the door facing. Dad had another use for that strap than just to hone his razor; he honed character with it!

While Dad's menacing looking axe brought no fears, I was terrified by his razor strap. Don't misinterpret; he was not an abusive father; he just wanted good kids. And I consider that he was successful in his efforts.

Really, it was not the licking that hurt so much as it was my knowing that I had disobeyed him, aroused his displeasure, and strained the peaceful, loving relationship that we had in the family.

In the Scriptures we are taught to fear God, and there are some awesome demonstrations of his displeasure recorded. At the same time, the greatest attribute of God is shown to be love. In many ways he has demonstrated that love for us.

His love begets love in us for him. While accepting us as his children, he has assured us that he disciplines as a father who corrects his children.

There is no fear in love. Perfect love casts out fear. There is peace and security in our relationship.

I do not live in fear of his axe of destruction in hell; yet I fear his razor strap of discipline which he uses to direct me into being a more mature son of his. God is not bent on destroying me but is intent of saving me so that we can be together forever.

If, however, I should turn my back on him and his Son and deliberately choose a course of rejection and impiety, I would have cause to tremble in constant fear. For such a person, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31). But such fear does not afflict the child of his who loves him and is sincerely trying to live in fellowship with him.

We fear his razor strap, not his axe.

Chapter 10

A Love Story

When Rodney started to school, Ashley was in his class. He had seen her before but he was not interested in girls. He loved the rough and tumble companionship of the neighborhood boys — especially of Keith and Roger. They ran and wrestled and played, testing their strength and skills against each other. Besides, even though Ashley lived only three streets over, hers was a better neighborhood which looked forbidding to Rodney. Even her name sounded too sophisticated for him.

After years of ignoring Ashley, even though they were in the same class, he began to change his interests. Keith and Roger no longer looked as good to him as Ashley and other girls did. But timidity would not allow him to show her any attention. As they grew older Ashley grew more beautiful, personable, and poised. Even though Rodney thought she was the most charming person in the world, he felt that she was out of his class and unattainable for a date or for a friend.

Then Rodney began to see that Ashley was noticing him, smiling when he looked at her, and even approaching him for pleasant conversation. Realizing this, he finally gained the courage to ask her for a date. The love story progressed from there. He felt her deep love for him in spite of his bumbling efforts to please her and to copy her refinements.

Eventually, after a developing relationship, she gave him the most thrilling assurance that a young man could ever hear. “Rodney,” she whispered, “I love you without any reservations. You could never do anything that would stop me from loving you. You might do things to hurt me deeply, but I will always love you. I want to share the rest of my life with you.” And she did.

Such love caused Rodney to become the most affectionate and dedicated husband any woman could dream of having. Their lives were bound together by a most secure devotion that surmounted all problems and gave them peace in all times of difficulty.

From my earliest interest in religion, I was attracted by the rough and tumble doctrinal discussions which tested our knowledge of the Bible and our skills in argument. Through knowledge and skills, we thought we were able to prove ourselves worthy and to work our way through salvation.

In reading the Bible as a teenager, I read such passages as “Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not reckon his sin” (Rom. 4:8). But Paul was quoting David there, and David must have been exaggerating for emphasis — a sort of poetic license. That could not be for me. It was out of my class. Just ignore it. Go on in the tried and true law-keeping and achievement route. Those passages about imputed righteousness were several streets over in the forbidden neighborhood of the denominations.

As the years passed and I developed more in understanding, those passages about imputed righteousness began to hold more charm for me. In fact, they were alluring! But Paul just could not be saying that I could be a person against whom God would not impute sin!

In time, I began to hear God saying, “I love you without condition. I will always love you even if you don’t love me. I love you so much that, if you will commit yourself to me in faith, I will no longer take notice of your sins.” Unbelievable! He said that to me! How could I but commit myself to him in lifelong devotion?

Now it is a wonderfully peaceful relationship that we have — the peace that passes understanding. My life of works falls short and is ineffective. I still stumble and bumble. I sin. But he does not hold it against me!

What a love story! What a happy ending — and continuation!

Chapter 11

Three Trees In Eden

Usually we speak of the two trees in the Garden of Eden, but there were three kinds of trees there. Even though you may be more convinced than I am that they were literal trees, I think that you will agree that they had symbolic meanings. Let's look for the messages that they convey.

“And out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen. 2:9). We will consider them in order.

1. There was the tree that was pleasant to the sight and good for food. We will suppose that the inhabitants of the garden could have eaten of that tree of bodily sustenance without eating of either of the other two trees. Even though food and aesthetic enjoyment are needful and are amoral in nature, such a diet of “bread alone” would only serve the temporary, earthly needs of man. It would be a non-spiritual existence holding no hope or promise. Countless millions of our kind have eaten only of that tree, and they have died without hope.

2. There was the tree of life in the middle of the garden. Its centrality speaks of both its importance and its availability. Adam and Eve had unhindered fellowship with God who was the source of their life. As long as they desired, they could sustain that relationship. Eating of that tree, they would never die — never be separated from their life-giver and sustainer.

The first pair did not merit or earn such a blessing. It was the grace of life, a gift bestowed by God upon them in acceptance of them as his own creatures. It was the same grace that is bestowed upon us through Christ when we become and live as sons of God. It is a living relationship in fellowship with our Creator.

Those who continue to partake of that spiritual tree through Christ will not be surprised to find its perpetuated blessing in the eternal garden of God, for “To him who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” (Rev. 2:7).

3. Then, there was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Why would it be forbidden and so deadly? Did God want his creatures to be ignorant of right and wrong? When God gave them permission to eat of the other trees and forbade their eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he gave them some knowledge of good and evil then and there. That prohibition was a law which they knew and understood. What, then, does this tree symbolize?

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was the antithesis of the tree of life. One sustained life; the other brought death. If the tree of life represented the grace of God, then the tree of the knowledge of good and evil must depict something contrary to grace. In his book, *There Were Two Trees In The Garden*, Rick Joyner rightly concludes that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is the law. We can propose only two possible means for our justification — grace or law. It seems that the eating of one tree pictures the acceptance of grace and the the eating of the other illustrates man's inclination to seek greater knowledge of law in order to attain, to merit, or

to achieve his right standing before God through it. In all ages man's efforts in that area have resulted in total failure.

Laws were given to define sin: "Yet, if it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin" (Rom. 7:7). Law gives us the knowledge of good and evil. Paul says that what he thought would bring life to him brought death. "The power of sin is the law," Paul wrote (1 Cor. 15:56). Sin has a venomous sting which brings death. Law brings death, for no one can keep law perfectly, and law offers no promise of life. If a person could live without violating law, he or she would only be maintaining original innocence rather than receiving life from the law. Man is dependent wholly on grace.

We desire to be like God in discerning law so we may attain God-likeness through keeping it. The tree of legal righteousness appears to be good spiritual food, producing righteous people who are a delight to look upon, making us wise scholars (lawyers!) of the word. When one partakes, however, his eyes are opened to his own ignorance, nakedness, and vulnerability. How sad it is that, instead of confessing how bare we are and accepting grace, we try to cover ourselves with insecure works of righteousness — flimsy, scratchy, and inadequate as our fig leaves prove to be.

Although Paul was not writing about the three trees in Eden, his letter to the Romans could serve as a commentary about those trees. There were the Gentiles trying to live by the tree of earthly sustenance, the Jews and Judaizers who trusted in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and the faithful who trust in the grace and imputed righteousness of the tree of life. In typical manner, an animal was killed to hide Adam's shame. A Lamb gave his life to cover ours. He is that tree of life who gives us unhindered fellowship with God.

Those three trees are still in our garden of life. We may eat freely of the first two, but it will be fatal if we let the serpent beguile us so that we partake of the third tree.

Chapter 12

Imputed Righteousness

A lady once quipped to me that she had heard so many sermons about the Ethiopian eunuch that she felt personally acquainted with him. Perhaps, you feel the same way about the Rich Young Ruler. But have you heard the revised version of the account about him? Let me tell you about it.

He was such an admirable person who seemed to have everything going in his favor, for he was young, wealthy, a ruler, upright, sincere, God-fearing, respectful, and eager for self-improvement. He must have been handsome, too! Have you ever known a nicer person? Without regard for the dignity of his position, he ran to Jesus and knelt before him inquiring, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?”

You may remember that Jesus was disappointed with the response of this loveable inquirer. At what point in the interview was Jesus disappointed? My revised version may offer you something different to consider.

That sincere young man was not asking Jesus for eternal life, but he was wanting to know what good deed he could do to gain that life. Jesus recognized in him the heart of the achiever — the do-it-yourself religion of the Pharisee. Jesus’ answer should have brought him to a proper sense of perspective: “If you would enter life, keep the commandments.” But, as Jesus began to enumerate the Ten Commandments, the young man interrupted, “Teacher, all these have I observed from my youth; what do I still lack?”

Generally, we have praised the young man for his keeping of all the commandments and for his desire to go beyond perfect law-keeping into meritorious philanthropy. Jesus’ answer should have broken through the youth’s facade of achieved righteousness so that he would have responded despairingly, “But, Teacher, you know that I cannot keep all the commandments perfectly! Besides, you know that law cannot give life!” Then Jesus could have reassured him with, “Believe on me and I will give you eternal life!” Or, as he offered to the Samaritan woman, “Ask me for living water; the water that I shall give you will become in you a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

“Now that I am such an exemplary law-keeper,” the young man seems to be saying, “what good deed of achievement do I lack?” So, Jesus seems to be answering him, “All right, since you are going the route of achievement, I am challenging you to go all the way: sell all that you have and give it to the poor and follow me as an itinerant preacher!” Instead of the young man recognizing the futility of his effort toward achieved righteousness, he only saw that he was beaten in his own game. So, he walked away in sadness. He failed his own challenge which Jesus threw back to him. We, like Jesus, love him for his goodness and are saddened to see him leave, being so rich, yet so poor.

While our attention is given to Jesus' teaching concerning the peril in the acquiring of riches in this text, it must not be diverted from the real lesson about justification (or righteousness) which the Rich Young Ruler inquired about.

When the disciples inquired in puzzlement, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus replied, "With men this is impossible." This nobleman, this most nearly perfect of human beings could not save himself through his sincerest effort of good works and obedience of law, and he lost the joy of his religion when he realized that he could not. He walked away with saddened countenance instead of waiting to hear the good news of grace that "with God all things are possible!" God can save the imperfect man, knowing that he will always be imperfect and undeserving.

In our sermonizing on this narrative, we have generally emphasized our disappointment that this young man was unwilling to give all that he had to the poor; yet, we do not make that a requirement for the rest of us. Jesus never set the impoverishing of ourselves as a prerequisite of salvation, but he was trying to make this works-oriented man see the folly of depending upon what he could accomplish. With man — even this most nearly perfect man with much wealth — it is impossible. Jesus probed, "What could a man offer to buy back his soul once he had lost it?" (Matt. 16:26; J. B. Phillips). If a person owned the whole world, he could not redeem his soul with its treasures or by the use of them. After receiving the gift of life from Jesus, however, the rich man would still have had his riches to use in expressing his love and gratitude to both God and man.

In our generation, many disciples have turned away with saddened countenances because they have felt that they could never measure up. Many others have continued to bear the burden of a "demand" religion as they doggedly try to perform all the good works. They, like the young ruler, are never sure that they are doing enough. They lose the joy of their relationship with Christ.

But, praise the Lord, others of us are accepting imputed righteousness as a gift. Being free of the oppressive yoke of legal demands, they no longer feel compelled to prove themselves to be good enough to be saved or to do deeds of philanthropy sufficient to gain his favor. In their sanctified lives, they use his gifts to show their love and gratitude by serving God and their fellow man. It is a life of security, joy, and happiness.

The old version pictures efforts of achieved righteousness; the revised version illustrates the good news of the grace of God. While our disappointment has focused on the man's unwillingness to sell his possessions for the poor, surely Jesus must have been disappointed with the very first words of the Rich Young Ruler when he asked, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Compare: Matt. 19:16-26; Mark 10:17-27; Luke 18:18-17.)

The inability of this most nearly perfect of men to merit eternal life through his good deeds and law-keeping emphasizes the plight of all mankind. We have used this account to introduce a study which is intended to reveal that our only claim to righteousness is through a gift rather than through any hope based on infused, achieved, or accomplished righteousness.

Key Words

Our desire is to treat this subject as simply and understandably as we can while making no claim of an exhaustive coverage of it. Since it is being written for the ordinary learner rather than the critical scholar, we hope to avoid boggling technicalities (as though I were capable of such). We must have some common understanding of a few key words which will be used.

That which is just, or that person who is just, conforms to a standard of correctness, is morally right or good, or is legally right. Although a person may develop these qualities to such a degree as to be called a just man, he cannot be totally just and must account for what he lacks. He violates the bounds of rightness and is in need of justification. To justify is to establish as just by acquittal from guilt. Justification is that state of acquittal which declares one as being right. Some have simplified the meaning of justification to be “just-as-if-I’d-never-sinned.”

A person who is right, or just, is righteous, whose state is righteousness. The original spelling of rightwiseness illuminates the meaning. Some persons have been described as righteous (just), and all disciples are called upon to be righteous, but human imperfection is always considered in so doing. The purpose of this writing is to show how that a person who has failed to be perfectly righteous (which includes all of us) can be set right with God while it is impossible for him ever to be totally right of himself.

Although forgiveness, remission of sins, salvation, redemption, and eternal life are not synonyms of justification and righteousness, we closely relate the terms. We are justified and considered righteous because of Christ’s redeeming us, forgiving us, and remitting our sins, thus saving us to eternal life.

To impute is to reckon, to count, to account, to credit to the account, or to credit by transferal. Imputed righteousness is in contrast to the thought of accomplished, merited, or infused righteousness. To infuse implies a pouring in of something that gives new life or significance.

None Is Righteous

In the first five chapters of his letter to the Romans, Paul deals with the matter of justification. You are urged to read those chapters. All quotations in this study will be from Romans unless otherwise noted, and they will be from the Revised Standard Version unless specified differently.

Paul expressed his eagerness to proclaim the gospel among the Romans and to the rest of the Gentiles (all non-Jews) for “it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live’” (1:15-17). God’s dealing with man in Old Testament times in his effort to save men from their own evils and the evils around them was spoken of as the righteousness of God. Paul is saying that the righteousness of God is now revealed in the gospel. From this point Paul explains how a righteous God can forgive unrighteous man without compromising his integrity or demanding impossible perfection of man.

It is a dark picture that Paul begins to paint (1:18f). Although all men should have recognized enough of the nature of God to cause them to honor him, they had refused to have him in their knowledge or had disgraced his divinity by pagan concepts of God. Abandoning all inherent morality, they had degraded themselves. They were of such moral perversity that a written code of law would have been ineffective; so, God gave them up to follow their course of abandoned living. Man was without excuse, for he refused to recognize the Creator revealed through the created world. Even though man might have no written code of law from God, he shows through his conscience that what the law requires is written in his heart (2:15). Since no one could claim a clear conscience either in giving due reverence to God or in all his dealings with his fellowman, none could have a claim to righteousness.

The Jews felt that they had a better claim to righteousness because God had made a special covenant with them and had given them a code of law by which to measure their conduct. Because of God's special provision for them, the Jews were inclined to trust that this made them right before God. They looked upon themselves as the spiritual leaders of the world while they also dishonored God and broke his laws; however, the law-breaking Jew was in no favored position over the Gentile who failed to keep the law written on his heart (2:17-29).

Paul paints with a broad brush in dark colors as he reveals his shocking conclusion (3:9-18): "What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all; for I have already charged that all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written:

'None is righteous, no, not one;
no one understands, no one seeks for God.
All have turned aside, together they have
gone wrong;
no one does good, not even one.'
'Their throat is an open grave,
they use their tongues to deceive.'
'The venom of asps is under their lips.'
'Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.'
'Their feet are swift to shed blood,
in their paths are ruin and misery,
and the way of peace they do not know.'
'There is no fear of God before their eyes.'"

Unbelievable! None is righteous, no, not one! But do not despair: "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested" (3:21). God has made it possible for sinful man to be set right with him!

Good News!

This is good news for all mankind. Tell us about it, Paul. With eagerness we read his announcement (3:21-16): "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former

sins; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus.”

How may we gain this justification? If it is to be attained through the keeping of law, then we are still hopeless, for the Jew could not keep his written law nor the Gentile his unwritten law. And what could a new law achieve that those laws failed to accomplish? Nothing, for man cannot keep law perfectly, and besides, law can neither make one righteous nor give life. If a person should keep law perfectly, he would only be maintaining original innocence by avoiding infraction rather than producing righteousness within by his law-keeping. Law offers no remedy for infraction, neither can it give life.

Law has no power to save. John assures us that all of us sin (1 John 1:8f). James adds, “For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it (James 2:10). If we keep 99% of the law but fail in the remaining one percent, we are back to zero! So it is all by grace! If one is to be saved, it must be totally by grace. One cannot be saved partly by law-keeping and partly by grace. If grace saves only to the extent that one is able to keep law, then none can be saved! If one could keep all the law, he would need no grace. To the one who fails in his efforts to keep perfectly a supposed legal system, the traditional exhortation of the legalist is for him to try harder. While giving lip-service to grace, the legalist frustrates disciples by urging that they must attain it by keeping all of what they interpret as a code of law, or by making some sort of a passing score, indefinite as that may be. Claim of justification by law-keeping was “another gospel” of Galatians 1:6-9. Any effort to be justified by legal means is a falling away from grace (Gal. 5:4). Grace is not a quality of law.

Let us examine this text further to find exciting answers to our needs. How can God overlook my sins without compromising his divine holiness by sanctioning sin? It is “through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood...” (3:24f). In another place Paul explains, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). It was the substitution of a sinless One for the sinner. He took the place of the sinner, bearing the sentence of death for us. The law and the prophets bore witness of this in that the animal offered under that system was a substitute for the guilty person, bearing his sin, and foreshadowing the true substitute and sin-bearer, Jesus.

How is that benefit appropriated to me, a sinner? I have already failed the achievement test. He gives me that benefit freely! “They are justified by his grace as a gift!” (3:24). Grace is unmerited favor, a gift. It is by grace. It is “the free gift of righteousness” (5:17).

On what basis is the gift distributed? The gift is not given on the condition of keeping law: “For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law...” (3:20f). “Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On the principle of works? No, but on the principle of faith. For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law” (3:27f).

Is the gift received because of our works? If so, our cause would be hopeless still, for “None is righteous, not even one” (3:10). It is “to be received by faith” (3:25). Both the law and the prophets bear witness to “the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” (3:22). In another setting, Paul declares emphatically, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God — not because of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8f).

Justification is not dependent upon the correct understanding of all the doctrinal matters relating to it. No one can boast of having acquired full understanding. Grace is received through faith, and one may know enough to produce faith in Jesus while having limited knowledge of the Scriptures.

Imputed Righteousness

Paul explains to us how faith appropriates the grace of God without our working for it. Unworthy as we are, “since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (4:23-25). To expiate is to atone for, to pay the penalty for, or to cover, as propitiate would also express. Justice would demand that we redeem ourselves, to expiate our guilt, or make propitiation. God knows that we cannot do that; so he gave his son in our place. He will accept our faith in his son as though it were a sufficient expiation. He reckons, accounts, credits, or imputes Christ’s expiation to us on the basis of our faith. This faith is more than mental assent to stated facts. Belief involves choice and action. It motivates a person to decide to devote his life to Christ.

It is not that we can have mental energy of faith sufficient to save ourselves, but it is having faith that causes us to identify with him. Jesus identified himself with all sinners when he was baptized in a baptism intended “for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4-11), when he paid the penalty for all sinners on the cross, when he was buried, and when he arose from the dead. Our faith leads us to identify with him who took our place: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the father, we too might walk in newness of life?” (6:3f)

From my human viewpoint, justification by faith is the recognition of my true self in Christ and my identification with him in both will and relationship. “For me to live is Christ” (Phil. 1:21). I am relieved of facing the penalty for my own sins. “And just as it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment, 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” (Heb. 9:27f). Jesus, identifying with sinful man, met our appointment of death and judgment and will return to receive those who have identified with him through faith.

In Chapter 4, Paul uses the Jewish forefather, Abraham, as an example of imputed righteousness on the basis of faith. Eleven times in the Revised Standard Version he uses the word reckoned in this chapter. Please read the entire chapter to see the emphasis that Paul makes concerning imputed, or reckoned, righteousness. “For if Abraham was justified by works, he had something

to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness’“ (4:2f). This has universal application. Since God cannot exact wages or atonement from man by which he would earn the benefit, he justifies the guilty by accepting his faith as though it were meritorious. David also pronounces a blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works (4:6).

The Jews might object that Abraham, the father of their race, was righteous because he was in covenant relationship with God, but Paul affirms that righteousness was imputed to him because of his faith before his circumcision and covenant relationship. His circumcision was a seal of the righteousness which he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised (4:9-12). His righteousness was not attained through keeping of the law for Abraham lived long before the law was given. The promise to Abraham and his descendents did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith (4:13). “But the words, ‘it was reckoned to him,’ were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (4:23-25). That is good news for us today! God will impute justification, or righteousness, to the believing sinner, accounting him as though he were without sin!

In order to better understand the difference between imputed, infused, and accomplished righteousness, please consider these questions very carefully. Does God justify a man by accounting him as innocent, or by making him innocent? Is a man justified by the crediting of his account with Christ’s perfection, or by having Christ’s perfection put into his heart? Does God account us as regenerated because of our faith and commitment, or are we justified by a renovation of the heart produced by an act of God? Does God accept us while we are sinners by accounting Jesus’ goodness to us, or must he pour, or infuse, Christ’s goodness into us to change us into persons pleasing to him before he accepts us?

The choice of the latter part of each of those questions attributes a sacramental element to the conversion process, including baptism through which as person, supposedly, is made clean, holy, and regenerated. It calls for justification by God’s work of grace in man rather than justification by God’s work of grace in Christ. This choice calls for infused righteousness through which righteousness is actually accomplished, or achieved, in the individual rather than imputed righteousness where the sinner is accounted as though he were sinless. This is a part of the concept of works salvation in which a person must cease being a sinner before he is justified, instead of the sinner being justified by faith. Belief in infused and accomplished righteousness has fostered erroneous concepts concerning the new birth and baptismal regeneration.

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? 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 that he was a door, a vine, or a shepherd. So, an abrupt, sanctifying change of life is spoken of as a new birth. The change initiated by faith 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.

Failure to recognize this may allow our inherited sacramental concepts to 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 — a change worked in the individual through a sacramental ritual 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. This subject is dealt with more fully in Chapter 3 of my third book, *Free As Sons*. Various segments of this essay are copied from my other book.

Righteous Living

Are morality, good works, and rituals of worship necessary for justification? No, for they have no merit to justify, but these are fruits of sanctification in a response to our justification. We are justified, then sanctified. Sanctification is our separation to God and the life of holiness in relationship with him. This separation is attributed to the agency of God (1 Thes. 5:23), the Spirit (Rom. 15:16), Christ (Eph. 5:26), the truth (John 17:17), the blood of the covenant (Heb. 12:14), and the will of God (Heb. 10:10; yet, sanctification, or holiness, cannot be transferred or imputed. Holy living is the obligation of the one who is separated in Christ; yet, the saint will never attain sinless perfection. Many references call for us to be righteous, but no one can live so as to deserve forgiveness or to rise above the need of it.

To be sanctified is to be separated, set apart, made holy. Without this holiness, no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14). Peter emphasizes this saintliness in us, exhorting, "...as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:15f). Many other references call for us to lead saintly lives; yet, we cannot be holy enough to merit justification. That can only be accounted to us.

Our sanctification is the committing of our lives in an effort to conform to the will of God. It begins when we obey the gospel. One is as justified as he will ever be at that time, but he should grow in sanctification toward more maturity in knowledge, understanding, and conduct. One can never reach perfection, but he is perfected in his justification while walking in the light. If spiritual immaturity necessarily prevents our salvation, then none can be saved. None can merit such an award.

Is this a once-for-all-time justification? Yes, it is provided; we only have to claim it. "For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (Heb. 10:14). This is not supporting the teaching of the impossibility of apostasy nor giving license to sin. Those who are sanctified are perfected as far as the guilt of sin is concerned for they are walking in the light, sanctified in fellowship with Christ. In 1 John 1:7f-2:2, John assures us that "if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." The one sacrifice is still effective, cleansing our sins of weakness and ignorance. This perfection is not in us, for "if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." By this means God can be faithful to his promises, to his covenant, and to

his nature of justice and holiness while accounting us sinners as righteous. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Then, John urges us not to sin, but he assures us that, if we do sin, we still have the one who stands in our place and that his expiation of our sins is still effective. This is a great consolation; it allows us to realize that the perfection is in the sacrifice instead of ourselves.

God imputes perfection to those who are sanctified and gives us many encouraging promises. He will not let Satan overpower us. He urges us to exercise ourselves in activities which will give spiritual strength. Through his teachings, commands, exhortations, and promises, he urges our continued consecration. He cherishes our fellowship and wants to glorify us with himself.

The blood continues to cleanse the ignorant and stumbling disciple as he walks in the light, but he can abandon that walk and renounce the source of justification. If unbelief rules his heart, it cannot be reckoned for righteousness, nor can he be justified by faith. “Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:12f). The believer can change his mind, become an unbeliever, and harden himself against any further positive response.

If a person renounces Christ and hardens himself beyond any approach, then he is no longer saved. “For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt” (Heb. 6:4-6). This is not being said of the sincere disciple who is wrestling with doubts and weaknesses, but it is speaking of one who has known and experienced what Christ has to give and then knowingly and willingly renounces it.

That same thought prevails in these words: “For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries. A man who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy at the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man who has spurned the Son of God, and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace?” (Heb. 10:26-29). The basis for justification and sanctification is rejected; there no longer remains a sacrifice for sin. This apostate must pay his own debt for his sins in hell. For this person, it will be “a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (v. 31) who must exact the penalty for sin in order to remain holy.

This fear does not rule in the heart of one who is walking in the light, however, for his heart is ruled by the peace and comfort of fellowship with God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and all other believers. “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God” (5:1f).

The service of our dedicated life is in loving God and man. Assemblies and the activities in them are for our up-building so that we will continue in faith. There are no rituals to sanctify us, no quotas to prove our consecration, no level of Bible knowledge to make our grade of holiness, and no program of work through which to achieve worthiness. Our love for one another will lead us to conduct ourselves in moral uprightness, and our love for God will constrain us to make him Lord of our lives. None of this sanctification, however, will be an effort to gain justification. That was reckoned to our account as a gift because of our faith. We are first justified, then sanctified. Sanctification simply keeps us walking in the light so that we will not forfeit our justification.

Cause For Endless Praise

Belief in achieved or accomplished righteousness put the rich young ruler under pressure and uncertainty. He could not bring himself to admit that he was failing to keep all laws perfectly, yet he was fearful that he lacked something still. Such a belief makes us reluctant to admit that we are sinners.

Paul, like the young man, had accomplished much that gave him cause to feel confident (Phil. 3:4-12): “Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If any other man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless.”

Paul gave up all claims that gave him self-confidence so that he might claim his confidence in Christ. Counting all fleshly accomplishment and status as garbage, he no longer claimed a righteousness of his own. He continues: “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith; that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection of the dead.”

Trusting now in imputed righteousness, he could say, “Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus made me his own.” No longer protecting a facade of accomplished righteousness, he could write, “...Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners...” (1 Tim. 1:15). This saintly man could admit that he was still an undeserving sinner whom God reckoned as sinless because of his faith in Christ. “And I am the foremost of sinners; 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.”

In grateful appreciation for God’s wonderful provision, we may all join Paul in his doxology: “To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

Chapter 13

Different Essentials For Different People

Peter declared, “Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality” (Acts 10:34). The same gospel is for all. We will all be judged by the words which Jesus spoke (John 12:48). Using these and many other references, we build a case for uniformity of responsibility before God.

Because we want to be the judge of who is acceptable to God and who is not and we do not seem to know how to handle any variability of accountability, we have been inclined to reinforce the case for uniformity. By taking many factors into consideration, however, God has always dealt with the individuality of people. He has required different essentials from different people.

In introducing this lesson about essentials, let me ask and answer a few questions. Will any one be in heaven who did not believe in God? Yes. Is faith in Jesus absolutely required for one to be saved? No. Is baptism necessary in order for one to inherit eternal life? No. Will only those in the church be eternally redeemed? No. Will the gates of heaven be opened only to those who obeyed the gospel? No.

If these questions with my answers have provoked any interest in you, let me elaborate on some different classifications which God respects.

1. When the flood covered the earth, Noah and seven others of his family were the only ones saved. Right? They were the only ones saved physically. Countless others were saved spiritually. I assume that you agree that those who die in infancy are saved. Although they were not righteous by faith and obedient like Noah, neither were they wicked with continuously evil imaginations like the others. God did not require of infants what he required of adults.

That which has been essential for adults has never been essential for children.

2. Just as infants are mentally incompetent, so others never develop mentally even though they may live many years and grow to physical maturity. Dealing with them as persons who are incapable of proper response to him, God requires nothing of them.

3. Among those who develop mental competency, there is a wide difference in the degree of their intelligence and ability. Jesus recognized that fact in his parable of the talents where servants were given one, two, or five talents of silver to use according to their ability. He did not expect or demand equal response from the servants. In the parable of the soils, those who responded brought forth fruit in percentages of thirty, sixty, and a hundred. The Lord was pleased when each produced according to ability even though there was no uniformity.

Paul lays down a principle which is much broader in its application than to the matter of giving to the poor which he was addressing. To those who were capable of responding, he wrote, “For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a man has, not according to what he has not” (2 Cor. 8:12). That which is required of a person never exceeds his or her capability.

God does not demand the impossible of anyone. There are different essentials for different people.

4. Just as some persons cannot be held accountable because of their mental deficiency, others are not responsible due to lack of information. If a person has no means of being informed of God's revelation, it becomes impossible for that person to respond to it. Because we have believed that essentials were uniform for all people, it has been concluded generally that the uninformed were without hope; however, that is not true.

It has been essential for those having no written or prophetic revelation to recognize the God of nature so as to glorify him and give thanks to him (Rom. 1:18-21). Paul tells us that "When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them..." (Rom. 2:14f). God has written his basic law upon the heart of every intelligent person for his conscience to deal with. The conscience tells one when he has not given reverence to his Creator and has not dealt morally with his fellowman. The pained conscience and recognition of divine mercy should bring repentance. Paul asks such people, "Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" (Rom. 2:4). It is essential that such an uninformed person repent of his violation of the law written on his heart even though he has no written revelation or inspired prophet to reveal his need to obey either Moses or Christ.

Repentance is a universal requirement, even as Paul told the Athenians: "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent..." (Rom. 17:30). Throughout Bible history, God called upon Gentile individuals, cities, and nations to repent, the most notable instance being Nineveh. Those people were not called upon to keep Mosaic or Christian rituals and were not condemned for lack of obedience to a direct revelation from God. These matters are discussed by Paul in the first two chapters of Romans. Even though he reveals that there have been different essentials for different people, he also declares, "For God shows no partiality" (Rom.2:11). To require of some persons what is impossible for them in their circumstance would not be dealing equally with all. The impartiality with God is not shown in the requiring of the same acts of obedience of everyone but in giving everyone equal opportunity to be saved.

This question rises boldly before us: Why preach the gospel to the pagan if he can be saved without it? If ignorance is bliss, then it is folly to be wise.

No one will be saved by ignorance, but all who are saved will be saved in spite of it!

We will ask a similar question for illustration: In time of an epidemic, why take medicine to the ill for some will survive without it? More will be healed by the use of medicine. Not all of the uninformed will be saved. Many do not cultivate the spirit of faith or seek diligently to show love to God and man in keeping with the law written on the heart. The gospel can induce many more to serve God. The message can stimulate faith and faithfulness by giving assurances based upon the promises of God. The converts will be empowered by the indwelling of the Spirit.

They will share and gain strength from the community of believers. They will enjoy the privilege of prayer. The advantages of knowing God's revelation are many.

5. Let us consider a hypothetical case to illustrate how God requires different things from different people. We will think of a family that lives in a community where the message of the gospel has never gone and all outside religious influence has been suppressed. In this situation, as in all circumstances, God deals with each member of that family according to its individuality.

God expects nothing from the two year old girl or her twenty-five year old brother who is mentally incapable. The father in that family scoffs at any idea of a higher power while he lives a profane and immoral life, but God expects that he glorify him and give him thanks (Rom. 1). The wife and mother recognizes the Creator of nature whose name she has never heard and reaches out to him in reverence and thanksgiving while letting love rule her conduct toward all of her fellow creatures. That is all that God will demand of her in her circumstance (Rom. 2).

The circumstance of this family changes, however, when they receive a booklet containing the Gospel of John from an anonymous sender. After reading it through, they declare that it is fiction, thus changing their state from unbelievers to disbelievers. At this point faith becomes essential. They read that booklet through many times and come to believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God. They desire to know more and to accept his lordship fully, but they are limited in their information. They are accepting all they know, letting it modify the law written on their hearts which guided them previously. God does not demand that which is impossible. Now, they are disciples — learners, followers.

Since John does not include what we call the Great Commission, this family does not know the need of being baptized. The necessity of the birth of the water and the Spirit is taught in John but, since it is taught in veiled language as a birth, they do not perceive the meaning of it. God does not demand of us beyond what we can understand.

This family knows nothing of any necessary rituals, organized congregational structure, or group activities. Such things are not essential to their justification but may be of value in their lives of sanctification. If it is imperative that they obey every point taught in the scriptures at this time, they are still without hope. And so are all of us! But they are accepted while living according to their limited knowledge even as all of us are who seek to let him be the Lord of our lives. We are justified by faith, not by knowledge. Some knowledge is necessary for us to have faith and to grow spiritually, but no one ever comprehends all factual knowledge. That is not an imperative for any of us. God does not demand the impossible.

This family knows nothing about scriptural instructions for assemblies or the communion. As a family living together they continue to refresh their faith and encourage each other without any sort of religious rituals. By this the purposes of assemblies and communion are accomplished.

As these family members continue as disciples, they receive a copy of the Gospel of Mark from their anonymous benefactor. As they eagerly study it, they learn that God expects them to be baptized. So baptism becomes essential for them. Although they have many questions about the procedure of baptism, they immerse themselves even without knowing the formula "in the name

of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” They know nothing about being baptized into one body, the reception of the Holy Spirit, or of being in a church. Their remission of sins is not dependent upon such knowledge, but God fulfills his promise of salvation to them.

In time, their unknown friend sends them a copy of the entire New Testament scriptures. As they read, they learn many more directives from God. They find it essential to be free from idols, but they have already turned to believe in the one God. They read about worshipping God which only confirms what they had been doing. The demand for moral living was no shock for they had that law of love written on their hearts already.

As they continue to read the New Testament scriptures, they see that different responses are required of the various members of the family. For instance, the father is exhorted to bring up his children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, but that did not apply to the young unmarried son. The wife is told to be in subjection to her husband, but the son could not meet that requirement. The directive for elders to feed the flock was not essential for any member of the household. The family could not respond to the exhortation to assemble with a group of fellow-disciples.

Needs in the spiritual life change during development just as they do in physical life. For the life begun at conception, breathing and the eating of food are not necessary, but heartbeat and the blood supply from its mother are vital. Life and development continue over time. At a proper stage, separation from the mother becomes essential, not to initiate life, but to sustain it. Proper function of organs of the body is necessary both before and after birth. A balanced diet is required for continued life, growth, and function. At some point antibiotics or an appendectomy may become vital. The essentials to bring about growth, development, and maturity continue to change.

In like manner, a person does not come into spiritual life fully mature having known and complied with all instructions that will apply to his life. One by one he will learn of the sinful practices in his life and see the necessity of change. One by one he will learn of the obligations laid upon him. As he comprehends the need for baptism, it will become essential. The same is true concerning the importance of a growing list of activities needed for the sanctified life — assembling, prayer, trust, forgiving others, accepting others, teaching others, proper use of resources, patience, singing, and such like. God does not demand all these things of the newborn, but he expects a maturing process by reason of time. Which obligation becomes more important than the others? None give life, but refusal of any newly recognized obligation is a threat to discipleship. All directives do not apply equally because God does not give equal gifts. For instance, all persons cannot sing nor can all teach others.

The illustration of this family could be extended, but its message is clear without being too tedious. Even though our imaginary family is pictured in a unique circumstance, the points illustrated by it are universal in application. God does not require the same response from each person, and he does not demand the impossible.

It is comforting to believe that God knows each of us intimately — our ages, our genders, our circumstances, our mental abilities, our physical abilities, our opportunities, our motives. He

understands the things which determine our individual thought patterns. He is fully aware of the mind-altering and personality-changing influence of physical illness, depression, schizophrenia, strokes, child abuse, insufficient diet, torture, etc. Yes, it is comforting to know that God takes all things into consideration in judging our response to him. He will neither demand impossible things of us nor permit us to be tempted beyond that which we are able to withstand. He is eager to save us rather than to destroy us.

In view of all of this, how could we limited and misguided mortals ever be so presumptuous as to judge each other? Even though God has not abdicated his judgment seat, we little creatures have tried to usurp its prerogatives. How tragic it is that we demand conformity of everyone to our own limited understanding of God's requirements while rejecting other sincere disciples for whom Christ died. We who are to be judged — how can we be so arrogant as to judge others?

The One Essential

The questions which we asked in the introduction have deserved the answer that I gave to each. Heaven will be enjoyed by many more people than most of us have been led to believe by our partisan teachers.

In bringing this treatise to an end, there is one more thing which needs to be dealt with. Please bear with my redundancy in dealing with this vital matter. When we speak of essentials, we begin to think of legal requirements and of a supposed code of law given by Christ. The thought of defining and fulfilling all those directives leads us back to the divisive demand for conformity along with its inherent uncertainty and insecurity. Too easily, we revert to our former confidence in salvation through performance of legal works rather than trusting in imputed righteousness appropriated through grace.

We are justified by faith. The barest elementary faith is that of the pagan who sees the God of nature. His faith can be enriched and empowered as he learns more. However, if new evidences are rejected, it becomes disbelief and cannot be accounted for righteousness.

In our response to grace, we want to serve and honor God and to continue in a reconciled relationship with him. His directives in the New Testament scriptures guide us in this. In this manner we live a life of sanctification as long as we do not reject his will. We do good works not in order to be justified, but to grow in sanctification. We do not attain or accomplish righteousness by these works, for our righteousness is imputed — not merited, attained, or accomplished in us. It is Christ's righteousness credited to our account on the basis of our faith. Because of his gift to us, we want to live as closely to him as we can, ever knowing that only his grace makes us acceptable by allowing our shortcomings and transgressions to be born by Christ whose blood continues to cleanse us from all sins.

Faith is the only true essential for salvation. Our justification is a gift based on our faith rather than being a reward for performance of what we may call essentials. We must continue in faith. Many things are essential to the growth and maturing (perfecting, completing) of that faith, but perfect faith is not essential or attainable. Abraham was justified by immature faith before it was made more mature through works of obedience (Rom. 4:1-15; Jas. 2:21f).

Peter prescribed a means of developing our faith by adding the seven virtues (2 Pet. 1:5f). These practical additions will make us effective and fruitful, but he cautions us that we not forget that we were already cleansed from our old sins. Those virtues to be added do not remit sin or merit salvation, but they confirm that we were already called and elected: “Therefore, brethren, be the more zealous to confirm your call and election...” (v. 10).

Yes, we can have perfect, full-grown faith, but it does not come from our ability to obey enough, work enough, or keep enough laws. We will always fall short in our efforts. How then may we have perfect faith? We are urged to lay aside every weight and sin which clings to us so closely. The context indicates that sin to be unbelief. “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...” (Heb. 12:1f).

Jesus perfects our faith! Though we cannot attain to righteousness by conduct, his grace accounts it to us on the basis of our faith. Though we cannot develop perfect faith, his grace credits it to us on the basis of faith also! It is by grace through faith all the way! Praise the Lord!

“Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen. 18:25). We, like Abraham, trust that he will. But we err when we judge by human concepts of justice defined by law. God is impartial in accepting us through grace. He does not demand as essential that which is impossible for us, and salvation by complete faith, meritorious works, or sufficient law-keeping is impossible.

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit” (Phil. 4:23). “Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love undying” (Eph. 6:24).

Chapter 14

God's Sons In All Ages

You already know all about the new birth, don't you? You can determine who is a child of God and prove the necessity of the new birth. You know that the one born of the water and the Spirit is regenerated and received into the kingdom of God. You know that no one will be in heaven without these experiences relating to baptism.

If you have thorough knowledge about this subject, let me ask you for some information. Some things are not too clear to me!

Were any of the patriarchs sons of God, or were they saved without the new birth? Have they entered heaven without the regenerating birth of the water and the Spirit? Did such men undergo a conversion process? If it is supposed that they were exempt from the new birth because it was not required of them under the "patriarchal system," will heaven be populated by two classes of the redeemed: sons and those who are not sons, heirs and non-heirs, the regenerated and the unregenerated, and some who were temples of the Spirit and others in whom the Spirit had not dwelt?

If, for them, circumcision stood in the place of baptism as a means of initiation into a new spiritual relationship with God, then would not the females be left without hope? And what of Abel, Enoch, and Noah who lived before circumcision was instituted with Abraham?

These same questions that we raise about the patriarchs can be asked about Israelites under the law. The law offered no promise of rebirth or eternal life.

If all the above were saved by a covenant relationship, what was required in accepting the covenant? Was there some sort of conversion process or initiation by which they were born again? Was it circumcision, a mark of the covenant made upon the person because he was born of the right race? Was it entered by physical birth and an initiation rite of circumcision performed by adults upon the child? Again, wouldn't that leave Enoch and the women out?

How do those who die in childhood, the mentally incapable, and those Gentiles who kept the law written on their hearts fit into this picture? And how could John say that "Caiphas...being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad." (John 11:51f)?

That's enough questions for the moment. You may start writing your answers now! Please answer them all on one page, double spaced!

While I await your answers, I will try to establish a few points and to introduce some possibilities which may provoke further investigation.

1. God claimed sons in the period of the patriarchs. Adam was a son of God (Luke 3:38). There were sons of God who took wives of the daughters of men (Gen. 6:1f). Job speaks of them also (Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7).

Some of Israel under the law were said to be God's sons. Some prophecies of Jesus (1 Chro. 22:10f; 2 Sam. 7:14) included Solomon also as one whom God would claim as his son. God's discipline was to his sons (Prov. 3:11f; Heb. 12:5f). Israel was called God's son (Hos. 1:11; Exo. 4:22). In a more general statement, Paul includes all mankind of all ages as being offspring of God (Acts 17:28f).

As we recognize that these references to sonship are in a different context, we must look for their metaphorical usage of the concept of being sons of God.

2. The Spirit was not absent from the lives of people in previous ages. In the days of Noah God said, "My spirit shall not abide in man forever..." (Gen. 6:3). Pharaoh recognized the Spirit of God in Joseph (Gen. 41:38). Bezalel was filled with the Spirit of God (Exo. 31:3). The Spirit of God came upon Balaam and spoke through him (Num. 24:2). The spirit of God came mightily upon Saul and he prophesied (1 Sam.10:10; 1:6; 19:23). The prophets of old were moved by the Holy Spirit to speak from God (2 Pet. 1:21). They must have been sons, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God" (Rom. 8:14). Isaac was born according to the Spirit (Gal. 4:29).

3. Some from all ages and from various classifications were redeemed. No one would question that Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are saved. Christ redeemed persons under the law (Gal. 4:3-5). Gentiles who kept the law written on the heart were accepted (Rom. 2). There is reason to think that people today are also included who know not Jesus but are seeking God to the best of their ability while doing "by nature what the law requires" and "are a law unto themselves. The mentally incapable and children who die in early childhood are surely included.

4. Certainly, no one will suggest that any but the innocent, like infants and the mentally handicapped, were or will be saved without a positive response to God. That response is faith. Being an addicted sinner, man cannot achieve righteousness so as to be saved. Through the grace provided in Jesus' substitution for us, God accepts our faith as righteousness. The crediting of our faith as righteousness justifies us, and it is also effective in reaching backward to redeem those under the law, the patriarchs, and the Gentiles who sought righteousness. No person has or can come to the Father but by Christ.

5. In different eras among different people, that saving faith was demonstrated in different ways. Whether it involved a conversion process or not, we are unable to determine, but the sinner had to turn toward God and seek him.

Paul declared to disciples, "In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith." Then he explained the reason, or evidence, for it — "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:26f) — but that was not the evidence or cause of sonship in previous times. In this sonship they became heirs according to the promise made to Abraham. But Abraham had other heirs who received the promise who were not baptized. It was not a specific

ritual expressing faith that made them heirs, but it was their justification by faith which brought forth response to God's will in their time and setting. In different ages, persons were led by the Spirit to respond to different directives revealing their spiritual nature. The fruit of the Spirit in a person's life is more revealing of sonship than claims based upon performance of rituals or flawless argumentation.

Even today, a child who has grown up in a Christian home and has lived a sincere, obedient life may have no definite conversion, but, at a time when the child feels the responsibility, he or she will be baptized as an act of acceptance, initiation, and confirmation.

For people in general, however, such as the Jews whom Jesus addressed, there must be a turning point. This repentance is a response of faith — the faith produced by the word/seed which initiates life in a conception. The initiation and confirmation of that life is revealed more fully in baptism, the birth of the water and the Spirit. The life is not produced in baptism but at the inception of faith. That faith is accounted for the justification of the sinner. While baptism is necessary just as birth is necessary for continuation of life, neither baptism nor birth is the cause or beginning of the life.

When a person makes a dramatic change for the better, it is as though the person were re-born and starting life anew. That is a figure that Jesus employed. The concept of being born again as a child of God is a figure expressing the same thing which was accomplished in the lives of men who turned to God in all ages. For a further discussion of this point, please read Chapter 3, "Are We Really Born Again?", in my book, *Free As Sons*. (See how neatly I got in a pitch to sell you a book!)

The identification of persons as *sons of God* or *children of God* is metaphorical. Persons were said to be sons of or children of a person or thing when they displayed the nature or character of that person or thing. This was a figure of speech. Various persons were called children of Abraham, children of the free woman, children of light, sons of the evil one, sons of the kingdom, sons of darkness, sons of disobedience, sons of thunder, sons of those who murdered the prophets, or sons of this world.

We are not denying the literal meaning of *sons* and *children* in general usage, but we are affirming that they are metaphorical when speaking of men (and women) being sons of God. A metaphor is a simile that leaves out the comparative word. So, instead of saying one is like a son of God, it is said that one is a son of God because he or she has the nature or character of God.

Such a concept as I have proposed was comprehended in previous ages. David's plea is a classic illustration: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence, and take not thy holy Spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit" (Psalms 51:10f). Isn't that about the same thing that Paul was explaining in reference to "the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5)? Neither the concepts of God's washing/cleansing, sonship/regeneration, or giving/renewing of the Spirit are unique in New Testament thought. These are figurative descriptions of man's change of life in turning to God and of God's forgiveness at that time.

I have limited my references and argumentation for brevity. I think that your study will produce many corroborative evidences from the Scriptures. All of my beliefs are tentative, awaiting more information and better understanding. You are still my brother (figuratively!) even if you disagree with me.

This has been another study that has left me less dogmatic and less judgmental of others. God has accepted people equally in all ages even though he might not have required the same things of them as he does of me and though he did not use the same terminology to describe them as he does for me. I must conform to the will of God as I perceive it addressed to me and I must also allow others to exercise that same conscience. I no longer feel that I have to identify all of God's children — those who have his nature and character — by their performance of the same rituals. God knows who they are. John tells of Caiaphas' accurate prophecy that Jesus would die "to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (John 11:42). God's sons in all ages are one in Christ.

Chapter 15

Looking To Lust

When I was a teenager, the preachers really laid the guilt on us boys by constantly reminding us that “Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matt. 5:28 KJV). They would go on to explain that to look upon a woman with sexual desires was lust.

I knew that it was impossible for me or any other normal boy to smother sexual cravings or to look upon an attractive girl without some feelings toward her. Knowing that marriage itself was divinely approved and that a man did not choose and marry a wife without strong sexual desires, I felt that the preachers were either ignorant or sanctimoniously crying “Wolf!”. Without help from the preachers, I concluded that lust was more than a strong desire; it had to have the consent of the mind to commit a sinful act. But in this essay, I will modify that further.

Fifty years this side of my teens, I know that the appeal of an attractive woman is not limited to teenagers, and older men are still in this guilt trap. It was lack of understanding of this matter that caused President Jimmy Carter to make his notorious admission to lusting after women.

What was the result of that lust of which Jesus spoke? It was adultery in the heart, not fornication. Adultery involves a married person; fornication does not. One of the parties to adultery must be married.

Who is this woman being looked upon? Jesus did not specify a virgin as the object of the lust. In the Greek language, the word for wife and woman are the same. It is translated wife or woman at the discretion of the translators. Since adultery is involved, Jesus evidently is saying, “Whoever looks upon a wife (of another man).”

Lust and covet are also translated from the same Greek word at the discretion of the translators. The same Ten Commandments which said, “You shall not commit adultery,” further explained, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife” (Exo. 20:14, 17). Jesus is only explaining that the law forbidding adultery always included the sin of coveting someone’s wife. He was not talking about sexual attraction! The contextual statements of Jesus are about marriage, divorce, and remarriage.

Without strong desires to motivate us, we would be indolent and listless. God gave us these energizing forces within us. While we are to make use of them, we are warned repeatedly that we must always control them. It is no more a sin to have feelings for an attractive woman than it is to have a strong desire for the apple pie set before you; yet the reaction to both motivations must be kept in proper control. We must master all feelings rather than stimulating those that cause us to give mental assent to committing the sinful act resulting from unrestrained desires.

Chapter 16

Divorce Her!

Throughout history it has been difficult for a single woman to live independently. This has been true especially when she has had to provide for her children. She has found it to be expedient, if not necessary, to marry so as to have a husband to provide for her.

When a husband was displeased with his wife and caused a separation without giving her a divorce, it was a special form of cruelty, for she would not be free to marry another man. Because of her husband's hardness of heart, she would be driven into an impoverished and outcast state.

The Pharisees tested Jesus with questions about marriage and divorce (Matt. 19:3-9). Jesus assured them that God intended marriage ties to be permanent; yet Moses had commanded that a certificate of divorce be given by the man who put his wife away. The reason: "For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so."

Because it was unmerciful to send a wife away to be denied the support of a husband, Moses had said, "Divorce her!" Being divorced, she would be free to remarry. This merciful course alleviated the hardheartedness and pain of being rejected and driven out (See Deut. 14:1-4).

Generally, it has been thought that Jesus disapproved of this Mosaic provision as though it were Moses' own innovative idea. But this was a feature of the Law of Moses that Jesus was explaining, and he was not annulling it. If Jesus had not granted that same protection for the rejected wife, he would have been subjecting her again to the husband of callous heart and action.

When we contend that the divorced wife cannot remarry, we are laying the same cruel burden on the woman.

When we declare that her only appropriate course of action is to remain single or return to her husband, we fail to recognize that Moses would not permit her to return to her first husband after being divorced and remarried. Divorcing her second husband and returning to the first one was not an acceptable solution.

Paul grants to all the unmarried women (which includes maidens, widows, and divorced persons) the privilege of marriage. The woman who left her husband to be more devoted to Christ was obliged to either remain under that celibate vow or return to her husband (1 Cor. 7:1-12). He did not impose a celibate life on her.

An accurate translation of verses 27 and 28 further bears this out: "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" (NEB. Compare KJV, ASV, NASV. "Loose" means to unbind, release).

So, divorce her instead of just separating, and let her remarry instead of suffering rejection and destitution.

Chapter 17

“While Her Husband Is Alive”

In discussions concerning marriage, divorce, and remarriage, Paul’s explanation in Romans 7:1-3 has been both misunderstood and misused. From it some students conclude that there is no condition which makes divorce and remarriage acceptable. Other persons allow for divorce under certain conditions but they contend that a subsequent marriage would be sinful.

Let me direct your attention to a few points about this passage which often are overlooked. Sometimes we become so confused by our boggling explanations that we fail to see some of the plainest teachings.

In the Revised Standard Version the passage reads: “Do you not know, brethren — for I am speaking to those who know the law — that the law is binding on a person only during his life? Thus a married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies she is discharged from the law concerning the husband. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.”

Paul has much to say about the Law of Moses in the Roman epistle. In this setting he is using a point about marriage as an illustration. He is not stating all of the regulations that may pertain to marriage, but he is teaching that a Jew could accept Christ without disrespecting or violating the Law of Moses. That is simple enough until we get hung up on quibbles.

Under the law a woman could not divorce her husband; so, she was bound to him generally. Does that mean that she could never be divorced with permission to remarry? It does not!

Paul was addressing “those who know the law.” What did the law say? In Deuteronomy 24:1-4 it clearly states that a man could give his wife a bill of divorce and send her out of his house. Thus she was freed from the man so that she could become the wife of another man. God put that provision in the Law because of “your hardness of heart” (Matt. 19:3-9). In those times when a woman could hardly make her own way alone in their society, it would have been hard-hearted to drive her out with no permission to find another man to provide for her.

Did the law demand that she continue to consider herself to be that man’s wife after he divorced her? No. Was she branded as an adulteress when she married another man? No. Was her second union an unlawful situation rather than really being a marriage? No, for she became “another man’s wife,” not a live-in. Marriage partners do not commit adultery with one another.

Was this remarried woman living with, or married to, “another man while her husband is alive”? She was not! She had no husband at the time she became another man’s wife. After her husband gave her a bill of divorce, he was no longer her husband. He is then referred to as her “former husband.” He became an ex-husband from whom she was free with the privilege of becoming another man’s wife.

If a husband found an “indecent,” or an “unseemly thing,” in his wife, he could divorce her, according to the Law of Moses (Deut. 24:1-4). Whether this was something genetic (kinship), bad manners, or immoral conduct, the cause for the divorce lay in her. (Evidently, the problem was not a sexual sin against her husband; adultery was a cause for stoning rather than divorce.) Did this flaw in her make her the “guilty party”? Even though the grounds for the divorce were in her (and it was not “for fornication”!), upon being given a certificate of divorce by her husband, she became loosed from him and was free to become the wife of another man — the “guilty party” remarrying! “Knowing the law,” Jesus was recognizing, explaining, and reinforcing this Mosaic passage in Matthew 19:3-9. “Knowing the law,” Paul was not contradicting it.

Paul’s illustration in Romans 7 deals with bigamy or living with two men at one time. She already has one husband when she takes a second man to live with also. Under the law a man could practice bigamy without committing adultery against his wife, but a woman did not enjoy a comparable privilege. Paul states that “she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive,” but if her husband dies, “and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.”

Divorce is not a factor discussed in this passage. The general concept of marriage is being used as an illustration to teach the Jews that one could accept Christ without violating another relationship with God through law.

Paul’s explanation in Romans 7:4-6 takes a surprising twist. We expect him to declare that the law was dead, but he does not! It is not the husband (law) that died to free the wife from the law of her husband. The wife died! “The law is binding on a person only during his life” (v. 1). Under the law she could not put her husband away; so, she freed herself from him by dying while he yet lived! (Later, the law/husband “is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away” Heb. 8:13.) Paul had explained already in Chapter 6 that the believers had died with Christ and, in so doing, the disciples had died to law. They looked to law no more for justification for “The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”

So, rather than giving a discourse on marriage here, Paul is assuring disciples that when they died with Christ for their justification they freed themselves from law as another source of it.

We should uphold all of God’s law with fervor, but our zeal must not lead us to bind restrictions where God has not. The road to heaven has enough discouragements without having an extra yoke laid on us by well-meaning men.

Chapter 18

“They Won’t Let Me Preach!”

“I would like to be a preacher,” Sarah laments, “but in the Church of Christ, they won’t let me preach because I am a woman.” “Even though I am a man, they won’t let me preach,” Mark states sadly. “I tried preaching for a while, but I always got into trouble because I did not adhere to the old, legalistic, exclusive line. After word got around that I was preaching something different, the churches would not let me preach. So I gave up.”

My sympathy goes to both Sarah and Mark and I know something firsthand about what Mark is talking about, but both of these persons need to do some rethinking. Their limited understanding is a part of their problem. They have let a congregational system prevent their preaching when no congregation or association of churches has control over whether they can or cannot preach. Whether you are male or female, no one can forbid that you preach. As misdirected as we have become, we still have not set up a Bureau of Licenses.

A great part of our problem in this matter has been our expectation that the church supply us a pulpit or class with a semi-captive audience and permit us to expound our views which may be unacceptable to the majority in the group. While there is a wide world out there to be evangelized and taught, we have chained ourselves to the ready-made pulpit. You are commissioned by Christ to preach and you have no need to ask elders or anyone else for permission to do it. You need not ask a church to sponsor you or pay you to do it. If God gave you the gift, use it! The spread of the message has always depended more upon dedicated disciples than on church sponsored programs. So don’t complain that you are not permitted to speak for there are many places besides the church pulpit and classroom where you can speak.

Our concept of preaching has been limited to the pulpit in our assemblies without which most of us would not know where to start. It is only reasonable to expect to have to gain permission from the elders or the group itself in order to use their forum. We must expect elders and groups to oppose presentations which vary from their accepted beliefs. They forbid women to address their groups because of convictions, whether their convictions are founded on truth or not. How can we expect groups of disciples to hire us to be their “official spokespersons” when we violate their convictions? You do not even retain a person to mow your lawn who does it contrary to your liking.

Any congregation and its elders, if it has elders, has both the right and responsibility to judge the appropriateness of what is being sponsored and taught from the pulpit and classroom. While granting this, many of us devoutly wish that there were more openness for challenge of traditional orthodoxy. I, like many others, have met with much frustration and rejection while trying to bring reformation through the pulpit. Being realistic, however, I cannot hope for people to hire me to teach what they think is error.

Ladies, no one can stop you from preaching! In fact, no one objects to your preaching. Preaching is evangelizing. When Philip got into the chariot with the Ethiopian, he preached (evangelized) to him Jesus. You can preach (evangelize) Jesus to your friend as you ride along

the highway or in other situations. No one objects to that. You have a divine commission to do it. If your friend happens to be a man, you can evangelize him. The number of men makes no difference. We have labored under a false notion that teaching is private instruction and preaching is public teaching; however, preaching is evangelizing, whether to one person or a thousand, and teaching is giving instruction regardless of the circumstance in which it is done. There is no example of a person preaching to (evangelizing) the assembly of disciples; however, there were teaching, instruction, and prophecy in the assemblies of the saints. Preaching (evangelizing) involves teaching or heralding the facts concerning the gospel (good news, the “evangel”) and it is directed to the unconverted instead of to those saints already converted. Saints need further indoctrination, but not evangelism.

Paul restricted women from teaching in the Corinthian assemblies, but he did not mention their preaching. Perhaps, that would be included in his prohibition of her speaking; yet, he had already indicated that she could properly pray and prophesy if her head was covered. Our women have always been evangelists, not in the sense of hired, professional, public evangelists, but in the private, but powerful, ministries that God has given them.

As to ladies teaching in our congregations, earlier in this century we fought a battle which divided our churches in order to provide that opportunity to them. They teach in church sponsored, ready-made pulpits in our classrooms. Surely, we have set some inconsistent limitations but at least we have recognized women as being qualified teachers as well as evangelists. So, ladies, you are approved for both teaching and evangelism by our own admission.

Yes, there is a hitch which I am not hiding: women still are not permitted to address the undivided assemblies among our people. I can see the inconsistency of some of our limitations of their activity, but I do not have a simple solution for the problem. Perhaps, it is more a matter of conditioning than understanding that prevents my full admission that Paul established that women can properly pray and prophesy in the assemblies and that he denied them that prerogative among the Greeks only because of their abuse of the privilege and due to the culture shock that it brought.

The point of this essay, rather than trying to solve all of the problems, is to cause you to see that neither women nor men need to gain permission from any person or group in order to teach and preach. Forget about the assembly for a moment. There is a wide world for you to reach. As God has given you the gift, use it. Go to it!

Our concepts about teaching and preaching have been so assembly-centered and church-sponsored that much of the dynamic of the message through individual initiative has been lost. While we would hope for the pulpit and classroom to sponsor reform, we recognize that spokespersons for reform have always had to do much of their work outside of the systems and then let their messages gradually trickle down through the cracks in the established systems. And though people respond to the gospel during the singing of the “invitation song” in our assemblies, I would venture to say that most of them were taught earlier by a woman.

Those who lead in the public assemblies get the notice by filling what we would term generally as honorary capacities. We do not choose the most godly and the most efficient to carry on our public services, but we pass around the honor of being in the spotlight. Is that what you want? That can be a very shallow understanding of what it means to be “working for the Lord.” You, whether woman or man, can develop your own ministry of teaching and evangelizing which can be both effective and rewarding though it may not bring you stardom.

The pulpit is not nearly as important today as it has been in history. In the early church people had to depend heavily upon the public proclamation and teaching of Spirit-filled persons. Even after the scriptures were completed, they were not readily available to all and, besides, few were literate so as to be able to read them if they owned a copy. Throughout the centuries, the common man still had to depend mostly upon the pulpit and the system it represented for instruction. That situation gradually changed with the availability of the printed Bible and the improvement of literacy. Now, in our congregations, most everyone can read and has various versions of the scriptures to help in understanding. Also, there are periodicals, books, all sorts of study helps, correspondence courses, radio, television, tapes, video lessons, and private tutors readily available for teaching. Because of this change, the pulpit of today has lost much of its importance.

Any disciple today has the freedom to use these methods. In this essay I am not judging the appropriateness of a woman becoming a television or radio evangelist, for example, but I am simply saying that she does not have to ask for my opinion or permission, nor for that of a congregation. Neither Sarah nor Mark can rightfully complain, “The church won’t let me preach in its pulpit; therefore, I am forbidden to preach.”

Chapter 19

God's Perplexing Prophets

When a man becomes a spiritual leader declaring the message of God, we expect his conduct to be exemplary in all ways. Since he is a spokesman for God, we look for the qualities of meekness, courage, integrity, unselfishness, impartiality, compassion, kindness, and love in him. Those features are not what we always see, however. Sometimes we are treated to some bizarre behavior.

Before me is a bulletin article titled, "Ezra: A Model for Preachers." Today's spokesmen are urged to follow the example of this prophet: "For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments" (Ezra 7:10). That is a great example.

The bulletin article did not tell, however, that when Ezra was told that the priests had defiled themselves by marrying foreign women and had corrupted their religion with the idolatrous abominations of the land, he became emotionally passionate. Later, Ezra told of his own response: "When I heard this, I rent my garment and my mantle and pulled hair from my head and beard, and sat appalled" (Ezra 9:3). Wouldn't that look great on the television news!

At least, Ezra did no harm to others. The case with Nehemiah was different. Concerning those who had married foreign women he wrote, "And I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair; and I made them take an oath..." (Neh. 13:25). He also chased one priest from him (v. 28). Look, everybody; he's our preacher!

We would have been proud of our man, Elijah, when he contested the gods at Mount Carmel, but then he went a bit beyond debate and defrocking when he took the 450 prophets of Baal to the brook Kishon and killed them (1 Kings 18).

As a successor to Elijah, Elisha did some courageous things to make us proud; however he was a bit sensitive and temperamental about his hairline. Once a bunch of young boys jeered at him, saying, "Go up, you baldhead!" They wanted to see him go up in a whirlwind like Elijah did. Being called "old baldy" got under his scalp. "And he turned around, and when he saw them, he cursed them in the name of the Lord. And two she-bears came out of the woods and tore forty-two of the boys" (2 Kings 2:23f). Such an incident would likely put him out of business as a prophet today!

Our present day television evangelists are not the first to be disgraced by their exploits with women. David, a prophet and spiritual leader, had a sordid affair with Bath-Sheba in which he had her innocent husband killed. One wife wasn't enough for him, either. David gained much popularity as a killer of a giant and he gained added fame by his courage and skills with the sword by killing many other men. He could stir your soul with a psalm or kill you as the occasion dictated. Once he pretended insanity, drooling in his beard and scrabbling on the door, in order to save his life. We are nurtured by his wonderful expressions of trust and praise in his psalms in spite of the fact that some of them are imprecatory, praying destruction on his enemies

(Psa. 35, 58, etc.). David could not have survived in our day of television exposure. The comedians would have a field day at his expense.

In the New Testament history, the passions of the prophets seem to have cooled with a few exceptions. A notable exception involved Peter. Even though we recognize that it was a work of God, Peter presided over the killing of Ananias and Sapphira in the church assembly! He pronounced the harsh indictment against them in a worship service. After the dismissal, do you suppose that the people shook hands with Peter at the door with a customary “Enjoyed the service, Peter!”?

An occasional public whipping might enliven our “five acts of worship”. We have no record of it happening, but when Jesus chose and sent out the twelve, he warned them to “beware of men; for they will deliver you up to councils, and flog you in their synagogues...” (Matt. 10:17). If they did not receive a hearing or hospitality at a house, they were to shake the dust from their feet as they left (v. 14) in a display of contempt. Should our door knockers practice that?

Paul became a bit impassioned when he called Elymas a son of the devil and struck him blind (Acts 13:10f) and when he and Barnabas publicly ripped their clothing.

It seems totally out of harmony that a prophet of God would lie; yet there was an old prophet in Bethel who lied to the courageous young prophet who had confronted Jeroboam. Belief in the lie caused the young prophet’s death. Then the old prophet mourned his death and recovered and buried his body. Strange behavior. How could he be called a prophet?

When King Saul was chasing David, he sent messengers to take David who was with Samuel and the prophets. As the men approached, the Spirit of the Lord came upon the messengers so that they prophesied. This also happened to two other contingents of messengers. Then Saul went to take him, but the Spirit came upon Saul so that he prophesied also. In fact, Saul stripped off his clothes and prophesied before Samuel naked and lay naked all that day and night! I don’t try to explain all of that; I just marvel at it! And, to think how embarrassed I was just to be seen teaching unzipped!

Jonah would be a good man to build our congregation, wouldn’t he? He did not want to convert those foreign enemies, for saving Nineveh would not make him the most popular prophet back in Judah. He did his best to avoid preaching to them. It seems that he only preached to them to save his own life, and he did not have much enthusiasm about life at that. He asked God to let him die. He needed Robert Schuller to help him with his “possibility thinking!”

Wouldn’t you like to have a man like Jonah for your preacher? Oh, you have one like him already? He has been motivated by “woe is me if I preach not the gospel,” and he is trying to save his own life by preaching it. It comes through that he loves law which seems to give him power over others more than he loves the people. You get the idea that he looks forward to the time when the pagans, those of other churches, and all the backsliders will suffer their much-deserved punishment. He sees so much evil in the world, and living the Christian life is such a burden to him, that he inspires little enthusiasm or joy for life.

The history of Balaam is veiled so that we know little of his realm of operation and influence. He was a prophet of God, though he might not have been the most beloved and trusted one when word got around that he carried on a conversation with a donkey without registering any surprise. Although he knew what was right, he would have cursed Israel for money if the Lord had permitted him to do so. Balaam gave treacherous advice to enemies, and as a result of it a plague came upon Israel which destroyed 24,000 of them. This bizarre spokesman was killed in a battle fighting against Israel, the army of Israel being led by another prophet of God, Moses.

John the Baptist surely must have stood out in a crowd and, no doubt, must have been avoided by many who would see his weathered complexion and his coarse clothing of camel's hair and leather. His wilderness life and the smoke of campfires probably made him distinguishable by odor. In character with such a rough life, he had abandoned ordinary tact and diplomacy. He felt comfortable to call his listeners a bunch of snakes fleeing ahead of a fire and to make a public denunciation against the king for his private marital affairs. Why would God use such a strange character to introduce his Son?

God used some bad-spirited fellows to proclaim Jesus. They were not the last ones who have preached Christ from envy and rivalry. Paul wrote that certain ones "proclaim Christ out of partisanship, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment" (Phil. 1:15-18). Surely, no one would use the pulpit to uphold sectarian exclusiveness and take pleasure in putting down a fellow-preacher who is not even present. Preachers are all too loving, accepting, sweet-spirited, and humble for such a thing! The marvelous thing is that Paul could conclude: "What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in that I rejoice."

In considering the persons who spoke for God we must not overlook the women. They add a perplexity, not so much because of their strange conduct, but more because we have not known how to fit them into the picture.

First, there was Miriam: "Then Miriam, the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and dancing. And Miriam sang to them..." (Exo. 15:20). Holy women behaving like that? We excuse her unseemly conduct because she lived a long time ago, and she has nothing to do with us!

Also, there were Deborah who went into battle to give courage to her commander (Judges 4:4), Huldah, to whom Josiah sent for a message from God (2 Kings 22:14), Noadiah, a prophetess who wanted to make Nehemiah afraid (Neh. 6:14), and Anna, the 84 year old worshipping widow who would not leave the temple (Luke 2:36). We don't have pigeonholes for such women.

Then, there were the four unmarried daughters of Philip (Acts 21:9). Although they prophesied, they must have done it in teaching a private Ladies' Bible Class at home with their heads covered — certainly not in public or "in the church"!

It seems to me that God would have withdrawn the gift of prophecy from persons who abused the gift or made misuse of it like the women in Corinth who would prophesy without their veils,

like those who spoke in foreign languages with no interpreter, and like those in the Corinthian assemblies who were so eager to speak that they would not wait for the floor. The human will and selfish pride in the prophets and prophetesses brought much disorder and confusion into the assemblies. Yet, God was teaching his people through these men and women. No criticism was made of their message. Evidently, the message given each person by the Spirit was fragmentary for one might receive a revelation while another was speaking. The big problem seems to have been that the spirits of the prophets were not subject to the prophets. That all adds to my perplexity.

A recitation of all the eccentric actions of those who spoke for God would seem endless; so we shall go no further in this review. What message are we to gain from the examples of these spokespersons? You may have drawn some conclusions of your own already. I will offer a few observations which may justify my calling attention to God's perplexing prophets.

1. The violent actions of some of those men were expressions of God's justice and wrath demonstrated through his servants.
2. Even the greatest of leaders have feet of clay. Perhaps God called them because of their temperamental nature. A sensitive person may be more responsive to the need that God wants fulfilled.
3. Gifted persons do not always use their endowment in the way God intended. Spiritual gifts do not perfect the man even though the Spirit might overpower a man to his humiliation.
4. We must remember the great mission and work of a person instead of the incidents of poor judgment or misconduct. Human weakness must be overlooked and misbehavior must be forgiven. Otherwise, none of us could be useful. We, like Paul, can rejoice that, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed.
5. Viewing the conduct of those men from our perspective of history, we probably would not accept any of them in our pulpits. We would not defend a spiritual leader in our congregations who behaved as they did. We would be embarrassed and infuriated, and we would expose him publicly.
6. Finally, most of our spiritual leaders, though they are imperfect, lead exemplary lives. Our love and forbearance are tested by the exceptions.

Chapter 20

Religious Titles

If you are sick and tired of having people challenge your accepted beliefs and practices, skip this chapter. Otherwise, you may become upset again, bringing a sudden rise in your blood pressure. That might cause a stroke to wipe you out, and I would feel bad knowing that you went to meet the Lord in a rage.

To tell the truth, I feel an uneasiness about what I am about to present because I have been conditioned like others in the Church of Christ against giving special recognition and distinctive titles to fellow-disciples. I have looked upon religious titles as a sort of tag that the devil puts on the goats in order to identify them more readily at the judgment.

In considering the use of titles, we immediately turn to the words of Jesus recorded in Matthew 23. There Jesus addressed those who sat in Moses' seat as legal and cultural authorities whose conduct did not conform to their teaching. "They do all their deeds to be seen by men; for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the places of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues, and salutations in the market places, and being called rabbi by men."

From Jesus' introduction of the subject, we must recognize that his teaching here is corrective of an evil use made of a proper thing instead of its being a condemnation of the thing itself. There are other examples of such correction. Jesus forbade the use of vain oaths without forbidding all oaths when he warned, "Do not swear at all" (Matt. 5:34). Paul dealt with the abuse that wives were making of their liberties in the assemblies without ruling out their praying or prophesying altogether (1 Cor. 11 and 14). To avoid the abuse of making the fellowship meal (in connection with the communion) a reinforcement of party loyalties, Paul instructed, "if any one is hungry, let him eat at home," but that was not a universal prohibition against eating together in wholesome fellowship.

With these thoughts in mind, let us look for the balance in Jesus' teachings and other scriptural references concerning titles, recognition, distinctions, and capacities.

1. "They bind heavy burdens." Jesus had no complaint against anyone teaching the law, but he was striking out against any human being claiming authority to bind interpretations of the law. Surely, those men were not setting aside all of the law, but they were imposing what they thought the law meant. Also, they made some laws of no effect by their traditions. When preachers or elders bind any of their rules on the congregation, they are doing what Jesus was denouncing here.

2. "They do all their deeds to be seen of men." Jesus had previously taught: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). Many other passages also urge us to be exemplary in conduct and good deeds before others. Paul "boasted" to the Corinthians about what he had done. The purpose for

such visible good works is to show Christ living in us; when they are done to satisfy vanity, then we are condemned by our pride. That is what Jesus was crying out against.

3. “They make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long.” Phylacteries were vellum or parchment containers of certain scriptures which they wore on the forehead in compliance with their interpretation of Exodus 13:16 and Deuteronomy 6:8 and 11:18. Tassels, fringes, or borders were worn in response to Numbers 15:38f and Deuteronomy 22:12. These were special reminders. The Pharisees whom Jesus addressed were trying to call attention to their piety by exaggerating those symbols. The wearing of the symbols was not being rejected but the wearing of them for show was. It is like a person today who wears expensive “religious” jewelry for display.

4. “They love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues.” Is it sinful to receive honor by sitting at the speaker’s table at the church dinner or to sit on the rostrum during the assembly? We are taught to give honor to whom honor is due. That includes honoring our fathers and mothers, honoring certain widows, and certain elders who are to be considered worthy of double honor. Some in the church were “reputed to be pillars,” which suggests their recognized status among the disciples.

Jesus was not forbidding the giving of praise but the seeking of acclaim. He devoted an entire parable to teach this in Luke 14:7-11. In it he says that if we take the lowest place of seating as a guest, the host then may honor us by inviting us to the higher place. He concludes it with a declaration: “For every one who exalts himself will be humbled, and who humbles himself will be exalted.” Pride was causing those religious leaders to seek honors and to be visible, and that is not an unknown tendency today.

5. “They love...salutations in the market places.” This condemns the same desire for recognition as is mentioned above. Salutations were sent by the writers of certain epistles, and disciples are urged to salute each other with a holy kiss. These are commendable, but they are greetings of love that we give rather than sought-after public recognition that feeds pride.

6. “They love...being called rabbi by men.” This is an extension of the last two headings, but it introduces another forbidden element: “You are not to be called rabbi!” We don’t have much trouble with that because only the Jews call one another rabbi. But why is that a forbidden word?

Rabbi, doctor, and master (in Matt. 23:9) simply mean teacher. What is so bad about designating someone as a teacher? We do that all the time.

None among the Jews were addressed as rabbi until near the time of Jesus’ ministry. There were many disputed subjects debated by the schools of Hillel and Shammai, noted teachers of their time. Some began to acknowledge their partisan leader, whether Hillel or Shammai, as rabbi — the teacher, or infallible teacher! Jesus assured the disciples that they had one master (teacher) and that they were all brothers — equals in regard to any special prerogative as a teacher.

Jesus is not forbidding one from being a teacher or being referred to as one. Other scriptural references encourage us to be teachers. The apostles became authoritative teachers by Jesus' appointment. We designate our advanced academic degrees as a master's degree or a doctor's degree. Both master and doctor mean teacher, as does rabbi. It is not being a teacher, the form of address, or the receiving of a degree that is frowned upon, but it is the bold claim to be the authoritative teacher, or the granting of that status to another. Such is an affront to God. Anyone, whether pope, priest, preacher, elder, or whoever, who seeks to bind his interpretations or pronouncements as though they were oracles of God is in violation of Jesus' restriction. We have no religious rulers empowered to legislate, change, loose, demand, or require anything of any individual or group — not even to use a certain version of the scriptures or to wear a tie while serving the Lord's Supper!

7. "Call no man your father on earth." While living teachers were called rabbi, those noted teachers who lived before were called fathers. We are not to understand that Jesus denied us the use of that designation, for Paul claimed a father-son relationship with Timothy spiritually, but we must not use that form of address to denote any kind of spiritual authority. In spite of this warning, throughout history, men have accepted that title, claiming to be vicars of Christ or "other Christs" speaking as the living voice of God on earth.

It is not uncommon to hear a speaker say that God revealed a message for him to deliver. By such a claim, he is calling upon you to accept his message as an infallible oracle of God.

In our time, any treatise or book thought to be worthy of our attention must be replete with quotes and footnotes with an impressive bibliography supplied. While we agree that this can enrich the study, we must be cautious that our quoted authors do not gain our undue respect as authoritative experts on the subject. They are not our fathers, sophisticated as the dropping of their names may seem to be.

"Neither be called masters, for you have one master, the Christ." This word translated masters means leaders. Surely, we are to be leaders in that which is good, and Jesus is not ruling against that. But we must look to no church official, preacher, editor, or author as our empowered Leader. Our divisions in the body of Christ have resulted from following partisan leaders.

In all of the above, we see Jesus condemning those who "sit on Moses' seat." Moses was God's spokesman/teacher. The teacher sat when he taught. Men were presuming to sit in Moses' seat as empowered expounders while they bound the Jewish traditions and their own interpretations. Such were to be unseated. None was to make such a claim and none should give them such recognition. So, it is not titles as such that Jesus was decrying, but it is the investing of men in positions of power — even the eldership!

After these candid observations, we must admit that our old proof-text of Matthew 23 fails to support our aversion to the use of titles altogether. Are there any other grounds on which a prohibition of all titles is founded? We will look at two other related considerations: "God shows no partiality" (Rom. 2:11), and "But if you show partiality, you commit sin" (Jas. 2:9). God shows no partiality/respect of persons, and we are forbidden to do so. Preferment of any person destroys the equality that brothers enjoy, does it not? It is not that simple! Or is it?

Respect of Persons

Even though God is no respecter of persons, he chose Abraham to head a nation. Concerning Jacob's selection over Esau, "Though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call," Rebecca was told, "The elder shall serve the younger" (Rom. 9:11f). God elevated the tribe of Levi to the priesthood. He raised up patriarchs, judges, kings, prophets, and nations. Was that not showing partiality?

God set various men in different capacities: "And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?" (1 Cor. 12:27-30; compare Eph. 4:11f). Without question, all were not called to equal capacities or empowered impartially.

The impartiality of God must have to do with more specific things. Although he made distinction between Jew and Gentile, he saves them without that regard. Although there are many differences in God's gifts and endowments to us individually, he saves us without regard to that.

When we recognize the different capacities and endowments in various individuals and we give honor to those to whom God gives it, are we not showing partiality? When we defer to those to whom we are taught to submit, are we committing sin? Paul referred to "James, Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars" (Gal. 2:9). Was that wrong?

Writers of the New Testament scriptures showed some respect of persons. Names were listed according to the prominence of the persons mentioned, hence, it was "Peter, James, and John," or "Jesus, Peter, James, and John." They listed the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in that order. Early in their tour, Luke writes of Barnabas and Saul, but after Paul became more prominent, it was Paul and Barnabas. When Silas was with Paul, he was mentioned after Paul, but then it became Silas and Timothy when that pair was together. Earlier we read of Aquila and Priscilla, but when Priscilla became the more prominent, the names were reversed. Jews were mentioned before Greeks or Gentiles.

This leads me to conclude that we should be eager to give special notice to honorable persons. The person who seeks distinction does not qualify for it. Authoritative titles would be out of the question for us, because none can claim an endowment of power. Deferential treatment which recognizes true character and service is not akin to partiality shown to persons of position or wealth.

Titles and Appositions

A title is an appellation of dignity, honor, distinction, or preeminence attached to a person by virtue of rank, office, or attainment. An apposition is a grammatical construction in which two typically adjacent nouns referring to the same person or thing stand in the same syntactical

relation to the rest of a sentence. For example, Timothy the evangelist is equal to the evangelist Timothy. Biblical writers preferred giving the name of the person followed by an apposition; hence, it was Herod the king instead of the appositive King Herod. It was Philip the evangelist rather than the Evangelist Philip. But what is the real difference in the usages?

Jesus was the savior's name; Christ was his title. He is generally referred to in scripture as Jesus Christ but rarely Christ Jesus. It seems only to be a custom of Hebrew expression that they did not use the title as an appositive, making it Christ Jesus instead of Jesus Christ. But there is little difference to be argued about the two expressions.

With this being true, there is nothing wrong about using such appositions as the apostle, the elder, the bishop, etc. as appositives, making them Apostle Paul, Bishop Brown, Elder White, Pastor Black, Evangelist Green, and Teacher Bland. And don't forget Deacon Jones! Even though I contend that these forms of identification are in harmony with Jesus' teaching, I am not proposing that we make them customary among us. None of these functional appellations display the ignorance or arrogance of our customary designation of a man as the minister of a congregation.

Recognizing the capacity in which the Lord has assigned a person to serve, we may and should give him honor, but not authority. It is no more partial or elevating to address a man by the title appropriate for his work than to list his name on the letterhead, bulletin, or directory as an elder, deacon, or other capacity. An appellation recognizing the function or capacity is no more distinguishing than the actual performing of the function or the filling of the capacity.

We are called upon to give due honor, but we cannot put a man in Moses' or Christ's seat of authority: furthermore, we must not look upon any person as having that capacity whether we give him a title or not. Titles must not be distinguishing; they only identify the person who has already distinguished himself in the capacity and function that the Spirit has assigned him.

It is impossible for us to give equal recognition and praise to all. To give everyone the same applause is hardly to praise at all. To avoid all distinctions, we would have to remain silent and wear identical uniforms. But some people who would not think of wearing an elevating title wear finery and display an affluent lifestyle by which they impress everyone with their distinctive status.

In Paul's epistles, he mentions many persons without feeling the need to give all disciples equal attention. He praises some without pretending to give equal praise to all. Did he not know that he was catering to pride in the persons whom he saluted and creating jealousy in those left out? "Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena and Tryphosa. Greet the beloved Persis, who has worked hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, eminent in th Lord, also his mother and mine" (Rom. 16:12f). Think how Sister Persis must have gloated over being called beloved and a hard worker, and think how offended the twin sisters, Tryphaena and Tryphosa, must have been since they were only said to have worked! And just trying to be nice, Paul, poor fellow, put his foot in his mouth again when he described Rufus as eminent in the Lord, giving him prominence over the rest! How foolish we have been! Our fears and stinginess have made us tongue-tied when it

comes to praise but verbose in cautioning and finding fault. We should not have to abandon common sense in order to follow the Lord.

The original purpose of robes worn by the religious was to hide the individuality of the person in humble self-effacement. They were to hide the servant in order that the Christ would be exalted. Unfortunately, the robes came to have distinctive decorations to show the rank of the wearer. And that pride is a pitfall which can turn any capacity or function into a means of self-fulfillment.

Outside Our Fellowship

In our general speech it is common for us to speak of Pope John Paul, Archbishop Flores, Father Patrick, Mother Teresa, Rabbi Kushner, Ayatollah Khomeini, or other titled persons of various religions. Are these usages contrary to Jesus' teaching? I think not. We can use such titles of address detached from any spiritual connotation for ourselves. Jesus said, "Call no man your father." I can use the commonly accepted appellation of courtesy without claiming him as my father just as I can speak of Sunday and Monday without indicating that I claim the sun-god or moon-god as my gods. Commonly used names and titles can lose their original meaning in our personal use. So, I do not associate San Antonio with Saint Anthony; Corpus Christi does not mean the body of Christ to me; my speaking of Christmas does not mean that I approve of a mass for the infant Jesus; and when I speak of the Alamo, I am not thinking of cottonwood trees. I can speak of the Church of God without identifying that group as the church of God of the Scriptures.

I can speak of those titled men without recognizing any authority that they may claim in my spiritual life. Surely, every newscaster, writer, or public speaker does not indicate his acceptance of all such titled persons when he reads, prints, or speaks their names publicly in such a gesture of courtesy.

In our society people think to be extending a courtesy in calling a preacher reverend, yet this has been reacted to very rudely many times by preachers who are more concerned about explaining and binding a scruple than about embarrassing or insulting another person because of his sincere intentions.

"Holy and reverend is his name" (Psa. 111:9) we have been quick to explain, stating that in this only use of reverend in the Bible it refers to God's name, and that man dare not wear that name. Such an explanation is a display of ignorance. Reverence is honor or respect felt or shown; reverend is an adjective meaning worthy of reverence. Is no person worthy of honor or respect? If not, we are to be pitied. To be consistent in argument, we would have to say that it would be sinful to refer to a person as being holy also — which we are called upon to be.

The term is misused generally, for it is not meant as a title. Correctly used, it should be The reverend Mr. John Jones, or some other such use as an adjective. There is no reason why reverend cannot be used in this manner — that is, if Mr. Jones is worthy of honor and respect.

In our properly founded aversion to the title of reverend, we have called our preacher Brother John Jones. Even though brother indicates equality, it is used as a title for the preacher to distinguish him. All brothers are equal; some are just more equal than others! So it becomes a quibble over which word we use as a title.

Much to my approval, this generation has gotten away from feeling that we must address all disciples as brother or sister. Now, many of the younger people, especially, address the preacher as Mr. John Jones. But mister means master, and Jesus said for us not to call anyone master. I know that I am begging the issue here. This is not wrong unless we mean by its use to elevate or distinguish the preacher into a place of authority. I need not deal with titles for the minister for there is no such capacity or function in the Lord's congregations.

Since the title of Lord is given to God and Jesus, is it blasphemous to call a member of the British Parliament lord? The Greek *kurios* is variously translated as lord, master, owner, and sir, and it is capitalized or not capitalized according to the discretion of the translators. Likewise, in the Spanish language it is translated as *senor* whether it applies to Jesus or a man. That being true, if it is blasphemous to call a man lord, it is also wrong to call him sir.

Secular Titles

There are many secular titles such as President, Senator, Judge, Colonel, Doctor, and Professor. Even though both doctor and professor mean teacher, master, or rabbi, they are not in the scope of Jesus' condemnation for they relate to the secular world rather than the spiritual family of God. In the secular society men may rightly have and exercise authority. They are not trying to sit in Moses' or Christ's seat, yet in our congregations where they are members, they are usually denied any title because it would honor them! Why are we so stingy with honors?

It must be noted that, in spite of Jesus' rebuke of the tendency of the scribes and Pharisees to speak authoritatively, he did later invest some men with that prerogative. His apostles became plenipotentiaries of Christ, fully empowered to deliver the oracles of God. They were given prominence by being appointed "first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, etc." (1 Cor. 12:28). They were to be given special respect as his spokesmen, and we must still respect them as such. There are no successors to their capacity and function.

Then, too, we disciples may delegate leadership and responsibility to others of our number. Paul and Barnabas were sent by the disciples in Antioch to take their contribution to Judea (Acts 11:30). Then the disciples indicated their approval of them and commissioned them by laying their hands on them, thus sending them on a preaching tour. Elders and deacons are approved by those in a group to act in their behalf. Because an appointee is approved by the group and represents it in an ordained capacity, Paul cautioned Timothy, "Do not be hasty in laying on of hands" (1 Tim. 5:22). In this delegation of responsibility, however, disciples cannot empower others to legislate for them.

In concluding this treatise, let us review several observations.

1. Jesus' prohibition was not against certain titles which were taboo, but it was against the taking or giving of legislative power.
2. Catering to pride is forbidden.
3. While the outward display of piety is ruled out, we are called upon to do evident good works to glorify God.
4. God's impartiality is in accepting all people without favoritism even though he has given special calling and prominence to various people throughout history.
5. Our impartiality does not prevent our giving praise and honor to worthy persons, but it does rule out respect of persons based upon unworthy reasons such as wealth, race, or culture.
6. A person may properly be given recognition for his praiseworthy capacity and function either by our identifying his capacity and function in an appositive title before his name or an apposition after his name.
7. We do well to recognize the good and positive and to give honor and acclaim for it rather than being reserved and critical.

Because of my long and rigid conditioning in the simplistic views and practices among my people, I find it hard to believe that I have reached the conclusions set forth in this paper. And I will understand if you do not arrive at the same understanding. But we are still brothers — sons of the same impartial Father. — Captain Hook!

Chapter 21

Who Sinned?

The disciples of Jesus wanted him to assign blame for the blindness of the man who was sightless from birth. “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2). When did the sin occur? Or was sin the cause of his blindness?

New converts born into God’s family find themselves in congregations where some questionable things are taught and practiced. Unknowingly, they become partakers and participants in what some other disciples consider as sinful. Who is to blame? When does the sin occur? Or is it really a sinful situation?

To illustrate the problem, we will depict an imaginary situation. Let us suppose that someone develops a set of very simple lessons for use in correspondence courses. These studies deal only with the gospel story and faith, repentance, confession, and baptism as necessary to have remission of sins. They do not deal with the church, its work, its worship, and other such matters. These lessons are used extensively in different communities under the sponsorship of various persons and churches. Now, let us imagine the results.

One lady responds to the sponsor of those lessons expressing her desire to obey the gospel that she learned through the home study. A preacher calls on her, baptizes her without further instruction, and announces to his church at the next meeting that they have a new member. Later, she begins to hear him and others in the group talk about their expectancy of the rapture, the imminent return of the Lord, the setting up of the kingdom, and the reign of Christ on earth for a thousand years. Being a novice in Bible study, she supposed that those things are true without questioning.

In another community a family of four studies those lessons by mail and responds with a request to be baptized. They go to a service at the sponsoring church, are baptized, and are considered as members of that church. New converts don’t usually inquire about such things as the organization of the church; so they did not. It so happened that that congregation was directed by a pastor (the elder) and a board of deacons. This seemed to be of no concern to the members of the church; so the new converts had no concern about it, either.

In another community a man is brought to the point of obedience of the gospel by those studies. He calls the number supplied on the lessons and a preacher comes to assist him. This minister takes him to a building of the Christian Church where he is baptized and accepted without further question or instruction. The new convert attached no special significance to the name of the group.

Then, there was a couple who called the number of the sponsoring church in their community. This was a Church of Christ. The minister assisted them in their obedience and the congregation rejoiced at having them as new members. Months passed before the sincere couple became aware that the group was so sectarian in spirit that it did not fellowship others in Churches of Christ in the same city.

We might use many other realistic situations to illustrate, like persons being brought into congregations where women lead singing and prayers, where someone plays a piano, where choirs perform, where healing services are conducted, or where others claim to speak in tongues.

Now, let us ask some questions about those situations. Assuming that all of those situations involved sin, who sinned, and when did it occur? Or, is any sin involved?

If the entire congregation was in sin, could a new convert be baptized into it since the Lord is the one who adds the convert?

If the preacher sinned by being in one of those groups, did that make void the obedience of the converts? Does the validity of one's obedience depend upon the correctness of someone else?

If the convert sinned in being baptized into an errant group unknowingly, does that mean that a person can sin by obeying the gospel?

If the sin lies in the various congregations rather than in the new convert, how long may the convert remain in the congregation without becoming a sinner also? Is he accepted without blame until he matures into a stage of accountability which makes him a sinner?

If being baptized into an errant congregation nullifies the obedience of the convert, then is not the obedience of each of us invalidated since there is error in all congregations?

Must the prospective convert become thoroughly schooled in all doctrinal matters and then search out a church which is entirely free from error prior to his obedience to the gospel so as to avoid the possibility of fellowship with a group which is in error?

Or may the convert just be content with membership in the universal church without association with a local group until he can learn all doctrinal matters and then make his search for a congregation that measures up?

After finding that church which measures us doctrinally, must one investigate the moral and spiritual qualities of each member in order to make sure that he is not entering into fellowship with sinful individuals?

In each and all of these imagined circumstances, who sinned? When did it become sinful? Do people sin corporately, or only individually? Does one sin by association? Must one judge every other person before associating with him or her?

Finding The Answer

To answer these questions, we must return to square one. When you start out in the wrong direction, the route becomes more confusing as you go along. The road of legal justification, doctrinal correctness, and patternism which many of us have started out on has led us over some bumpy, muddy, twisting paths with puzzling forks of uncertainty. This is the route of

accomplished righteousness where we supposed that we must be right in all things in order to reach the goal of salvation.

Starting from square one, we must take the route of imputed righteousness instead of trying to cut a path of accomplished righteousness. We must accept the grace which accounts us as sinless while we can never be anything but sinners, either individually or collectively. No individual or congregation can ever be legally correct or styled after some definitely specified pattern. Although we are called upon to do righteous works, none can become righteous by accomplishment. Although we are called to holy and pure living, none can attain that fully. We are life-long sinners saved by grace through which we are accounted as sinless and forgiven. It is a matter of being identified with Christ who is our righteousness and truth rather than our attaining correctness and learning and conforming to all truth. Although we cannot establish and sustain our relationship in Christ without knowing some vital facts and obeying some necessary requirements, a perfect knowledge and obedience is impossible and, hence, unnecessary, and if it could be accomplished, it would make us sinless and in no need of grace.

When the disciples asked Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”, Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him.” Surely, his blindness was a result of sin even though we may have to trace it all the way back to Adam. Both the blind man and his parents were sinners, which probably had nothing to do with his blindness. But the gracious work of God was manifested in that God erased the effect of the sin in one who himself was a sinner.

It is not a matter of pinning the blame on the convert or the church; it is a matter of the grace of God being made manifest in saving the sinner and in continuing to uphold the corporate group of sinners known as a church. Neither can ever be free from the practice of sin, but they can all be accounted as free from sin by the gracious work of God through the merits of Jesus Christ.

The Lord saves each convert, thus making him or her a part of his church, his congregation. That is the universal body of those justified by grace through faith. That corporate group is no more sinless than the individual member is sinless. Contrary to a common belief, the Lord does not add the convert to a local group, or congregation. We join the local groups by identifying with them or “placing membership” in them. That is how we become parts of sectarian groups. These local groups differ in teaching and practice. None can claim perfection any more than any individual can boast of it. They are sinners accounted as righteous who are constantly striving to overcome sin and unrighteousness.

If the blind man had been rebellious, defiant, reprobate, or disbelieving, he would have continued in his blindness. If a person exhibits any of those attitudes, the work of grace will not be shown in him or her. Neither can a congregation be acceptable to God when it is characterized corporately by any such attitudes. However, both persons and churches can be lacking in understanding and misguided in practices while humbly seeking to know and do the will of God. The glorious grace of God can account these as righteous because they are in Christ humbly seeking to do his will.

God does not bind my scruples on others; neither should I try to bind them. I must accept others on the same basis on which I hope to be accepted by God. To answer the questions asked previously in this treatise, I have only to trust the grace of God. I need not ask, "Who sinned?" God tells us that we are all sinners and that all the saved are sinners saved by grace. Thus, the work of God is manifested in us.

Chapter 22

“I’ll Join Your Church!”

In my radio preaching especially, many times I threw out a challenge such as this: “I will join your church if you will show me from the Bible how to do it. I want to do what the Bible teaches; so, if it tells me how to get into the church of which you are a member, I’ll join it!”

Needless to say, I got no offers for such information, and that added to my confidence that the whole truth was in my corner. But how would I have responded had someone offered me the same proposition? Suppose some listener had offered, “I’ll join the Central Church of Christ, of which you are a member, if you will take my Bible and read to me from it the instructions as to how to get into it.”

How pleased I would have been to give that information. I could have shown that, in the beginning of the church, when people believed, repented, and were baptized for the remission of sins, the Lord saved them, adding them to his one church by the same process. They did not join anything, but the Lord made them constitute the church, his one body which certainly was no sect or denomination. I obeyed the same gospel in the same manner and I let the Lord add me to the same church — the church of Christ. That is the way all of us who are in the Church of Christ got into it and the way that all can get into it. (Notice how smoothly we transform “the church of Christ” into “the Church of Christ!”)

“Oh, you mean that you were baptized into the Central Church of Christ?”

“Not really,” I explain. “You see, I was baptized into the Rochester Church of Christ in West Texas. When I moved here, I just placed membership in the Central church.”

“Then you really cannot show me from the Bible how to get into the Central Church of Christ, can you? Where do I read about it?”

“Well now, everybody knows that, when you move to a new city, you have to place your membership there. You know — .”

“I haven’t read about placing membership in the Scriptures. Isn’t that the same as joining the Central Church of Christ?”

“Certainly not! You can’t join the Lord’s church!”

“Then, the Central Church of Christ must not be the Lord’s church because you joined it. You were baptized into the Rochester Church of Christ. Were you also baptized into the Central Church of Christ?”

“You are being unreasonable!” I protest. “The Church of Christ is universal. When you are baptized into it, you have universal membership, for there is only one church even though it has many different congregations.”

“Then you also have membership in the Northside Church of Christ, Southside Church of Christ, Eastside Church of Christ, and Westside Church of Christ in this city?”

“Not really,” I explain, “for those churches are all different. The Northside group uses instrumental music in its services. That is sinful, making fellowship with it impossible. Eastside uses only one cup in the communion and thinks that Sunday School is wrong; hence, they have no fellowship with others. The premillennial teachings of Westside keep it from being a true church. The Southside church refuses fellowship with the churches which cooperate to support evangelism, operate children’s homes, and other such works. That congregation is not a true, loyal church; so, we cannot recognize it.”

“How did those people get into their various churches which are so different as to reject each other? Did they join them? Did they do something different from what you did to get into them? Did they have to do something besides obeying the gospel to get into them?”

“No, they only obeyed the gospel and the Lord added them to those congregations just like he did for me in Rochester more than fifty years ago. The Lord is not pleased with those churches because they have gone beyond the Scriptures. They are in error!”

“The Lord surely knew their nature when he added the saved to them. Do you mean that the Lord adds people to the wrong church sometimes — four out of five times in this city! Does he add people to churches which refuse fellowship with other churches which he also built by adding the saved to?”

“I think that you are just being stubborn and are resisting the plain word of God. There’s little profit in discussing with you. Jesus warned us not to cast the pearls to swine!”

The plain truth about the matter is that the Lord does not add us to a congregation of any sort. He adds us to his universal church, and that is not in any organized form; it is just the saved people of earth. We join churches by joining congregations. These churches recognize brotherhood of all groups of similar doctrinal stance. We have invented an absurd expression, “place membership,” to avoid saying “join the church.” Whether it be done formally or not, when you let a group know that you consider yourself as a part of it or ask to be considered as a part of it, you join it. Due to your misconduct later, you may be withdrawn from. That withdrawal is based on the premise that you were a part of that church.

When a person is baptized into Christ in his or her home community, we consider that person as having become a member of the church where the baptism took place. No mention is made about application for congregational membership. Generally, we have thought that the Lord adds the new convert to that church. But people are added to all the divisions in the Church of Christ by this same method. They all obey the same gospel, and no application for membership is made; yet, they become members of various dissociating churches by the same process! The night of our sectarian divisiveness is rather foggy, isn’t it?

We are misguided when we think that God adds us to congregations. He does no such thing. He adds us to the universal congregation of the saved, but we join local groups. When a group does

not recognize other groups of disciples whom the Lord has saved and added, that group is sectarian. As a sect it maintains its own separate identity protected by its own distinct set of doctrines. The Lord does not add the saved to separate, dissociating groups. We join them. We form them. We perpetuate them. But that is not the will of the Lord. To say the least, if the Lord adds his saved to those distinct churches, it is an affront to God for us to reject any group into which he adds the saved.

We are faced with a reality here that we have not dealt with honestly. If God adds us to congregations when he saves us, then he either adds us to (1) congregations that are in fellowship with other congregations, or (2) congregations that reject others. If God adds the saved only to the Central church and others of its kind which he recognizes as his true church, then he breaks his promise in refusing to give salvation to others who obey the same gospel at the Northside, Southside, Eastside, and Westside churches and others of their kinds. If God adds the saved to these five kinds of churches, then he either approves of them or has made a grievous mistake in adding the saved to sectarian divisions. If God adds the saved to these five kinds of churches and then those churches reject each other, they have made the grievous mistake of becoming divisive and sectarian.

The Lord adds the saved to his one body, the church, which is not identified as the Church of Christ. All who are saved are in (and constitute) the church of Christ. Many of those who are saved then become members of a group denominated as a Church of Christ. Such a procedure is not directed by the Scriptures. If this Church of Christ dissociates itself from other groups of the saved, it becomes a sect. We have been misguided woefully in thinking that being in the church of Christ is equivalent to being in a Church of Christ. The Lord adds us to his universal church by his choice and action, but we join a Church of Christ by our own choice and action.

My challenge is still extant: "I will join your church if you will show me from the Bible how to do it!"

Chapter 23

The Church As The Route To Heaven

Jesus reconciled us to God so that each disciple is his own priest, being consecrated to God in continuous service. “There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor. 5:19). When we are in Christ, there is no longer a distance to be bridged through an intervening agency.

It is presumptuous for any man or group of men to claim to stand between God and man. To do so is to arrogate the position and function of a mediator. Yet such mediatory functions have been developed and claimed by men.

In the hierarchical system developed in the medieval church, the pope came to be looked upon as the “vicar of Christ,” that is, one serving as a substitute for Christ on earth. Those of lesser rank in the structure of the hierarchy, including the priests, were said to be “other Christs.” This official and sacerdotal class filled the role of mediators to reveal God’s will to the people and to offer up their worship to God.

A sacramental system was developed through which the mediatory function was enforced. According to that system, all grace was dispensed through the sacraments, and only the clergy could perform the sacraments. So the priest came to stand between man and God, and the clergy expressed the authority of the church. The church (hierarchy) could set restrictions, withhold privileges, and dispense blessings. The church became the route to heaven. If the clergy excommunicated a person, he was presumed to be cut off from God.

We in the Church of Christ have inherited too much of that mediatory concept of the church. Since we have no organizational superstructure or ordained clergy, it would seem that such a concept would be impossible. But our free access to God is being hindered by a repressive system which we have developed. In more subtle ways the church has become our mediatory road to salvation and service; hence, it is the road to heaven. Let us consider several aspects of it here.

1. The Necessity of Church Membership. Since the Lord saves us and adds the saved to the church, it is easy to conclude that one must be in the church in order to be saved. By that reasoning, actually we have put a wrong emphasis on church membership. Being in Christ is the essential, for he is our mediator to reconcile us to God; being in the church is the consequence. God is not in the church reconciling us to himself. The saved are not added to an organization or system, but the saved become the church. We do not become members of the church; we are it! It is the mediation of Jesus that saves us; so, the church does not serve any mediating purpose. It is not a matter of becoming members of the church in order to reach God and be saved.

2. Good Works Through the Church. Too many of us have been told that we must do our good works through the church (local congregation) so that God will get the glory. We have been warned that individual works are not done in the name of the Lord (name of the church!) and that they glorify the person rather than God. Helping community organizations does not glorify God!

Our contributions must be “laid at the elders’ feet.” Those elders assign and direct the exercise of our individual talents through the congregational program. The elders have the right to know how much one gives in order to determine if the person is covetous and deserving of withdrawal. (I once taught that! Horrors!) Home classes not sponsored by the elders are looked upon as clandestine. Programs of work or evangelism not overseen by the elders are considered to be in competition with the church, if not in rebellion to it. If members of a congregation participate in the Lord’s Supper at home or at a family reunion, it is considered as questionable, if not sinful, by many.

All of these scruples and claims reveal the misguided belief that our works of service in sanctification are mediated through an organization.

3. Worship in Assembly. Although most everyone agrees that we can worship God anywhere at any time, there is still a prevailing conviction that everyone must “go to worship” where the only worship that really counts before God is presented by a corporate group. That gives the church a mediating function between the worshipper and God, and it reinforces the old misconception that our religion relates mostly to church buildings and “going to church.”

4. Elder Authority. The development of bishop authority in the early centuries of Christianity resulted in the hierarchical system of a clergy through which disciples approached and served God. In recent years among our churches we are hearing that elders have authority over the individuals in the congregations and that the elders are accountable for their souls, thus standing between the individuals and God. When disciples “place membership,” it is not uncommon to hear some such announcement as this made: “The Smith family wishes to be a part of this congregation and to serve under its elders.”

Elders are being given authority to ordain scruples and standards and to withdraw from those who do not comply. This is being done in spite of the warning of Jesus: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you...” (Matt. 20:25f). In the Scriptures, elders are not given special prerogatives to withdraw fellowship for a congregation. Elders are being accepted as heads of local systems where they presume to dispense or withhold blessings by mediating or blocking the way to God. Some have been known to withdraw from disciples over the most trivial of doctrinal issues and the pettiest of personal differences.

Elders must give account for souls in similar manner that parents are accountable for their children, but parents do not stand between their children and God. Both parents and elders should give pastoral care for those in their oversight in order to develop them rather than to mediate for them.

There has been much fear among our people about having an unscriptural congregational organization, or even an unqualified elder. That fear is based upon the conviction that we relate to God through an organization instead of an individual relationship of reconciliation with God.

5. Confession of Sins. James urges the sick to call the elders to the sick room that they might anoint them and pray for them. Lest there be any sin to impede the prayers, and for the spiritual health of the sick, James urges also that confession of sins be made.

We have developed the belief and practice that sins must be confessed publicly to the church. This has nothing to do with the sick. We have abandoned the practice of elders going to the sick to anoint them and to pray for them, but we have retained the practice of confession of sins, making it a public confession. Public confession is commendable if it is to indicate repentance, to seek individual forgiveness of public sin, and to gain the strength and support of fellow disciples. But it has gained the place of a ritual of humiliation through which one gains God's forgiveness — a going through the church in order to be acceptable to God. The prayers of the church become more a mediation than an intercession.

Jesus taught us to go directly to the ones we offend in order to make reconciliation with them, and as priests, we offer our own prayers to God in whom we remain reconciled. We do not depend upon an intervening agency.

6. Congregational Membership. Can one be saved and serve God acceptably without congregational membership? There is no mention of church membership in the Scriptures. The Lord does not add the saved to congregations (local groups) but he adds them to his universal congregation. We choose and join the local groups. However, some find it impossible or impractical to be a part of an assembling group. They are no less able to approach, worship, and serve God than those who are able to assemble regularly with a church.

Disciples are urged to meet with other disciples. But for what purpose? We are to assemble with others for mutual edification rather than to insure that our worship will be acceptable. The congregation does not mediate so that worship in it is acceptable.

The purpose of this lesson is not to belittle the church or its meetings, but it is to emphasize our individual relationship with God. We are no longer alienated, needing an intervening agency. When we are in Christ, we are reconciled. There is no gap to bridge. Those who are reconciled are his universal church, assembly, or congregation. We do not join the church to be reconciled to God by it, but we are added to that number because we are reconciled. We associate with other disciples individually and in "local congregations" for mutual edification. As equals before God we serve him together, but the acceptable service of one person is not dependent upon another person or group of persons.

Chapter 24

One Hundred Years Old!

No, I am not one hundred years old! This is the one-hundredth birthday of the Church of Christ! I began this paper on August 18, 1989, the centennial anniversary of the beginning of the Church of Christ.

While I recognize that religious movements can not look back to a specific date as the time of their origin, as we have often tried to define for other churches, August 18, 1889 is the most likely candidate for our origin as a separate body. That was only thirty years before I was born.

Generally, our people have never heard of such a suggested time for our beginning because even those who know of it are not too willing to admit it. You have not heard of any centennial celebrations. I am not celebrating, but I am reflecting on it.

I can recall my shock several years ago when I read a statement by Leroy Garrett that, if he had to choose a beginning date, that would be it. I can well understand the reaction that you may be having to what I am writing, but I beg you to consider what I have to say.

You may be protesting inwardly, "You are crazy; we all know that the Church of Christ was established in A.D. 33." Probably, you have seen inscribed on the cornerstone of some of our older meeting houses: "Established A.D.33." Such cornerstones would be more convincing as witnesses, however, if we could, in an archaeological dig, find some in ancient Jerusalem, Samaria, or Antioch engraved with "Church of Christ, Established A.D. 33" or simply with "Church of Christ."

When people obeyed the gospel on Pentecost, the Lord saved them and added them together as his new congregation which we have called the church. The saved people then and thereafter were not a structured organization with such external marks that they can be identified and traced through history. Any effort to detect a continuous lineage or succession of the saved is futile. But we find it hard to believe that there has been a time in intervening centuries when there were no saved people. The gates of hell were not to prevail against this kingdom which was destined to stand forever.

No one of whom I know has tried to trace a group known as the Church of Christ back to Pentecost. If there were saved people during the centuries, they were either in unnamed groups or among the historic churches.

That is where Thomas and Alexander Campbell come into the picture. Concluding that there were saved people among the various fellowships, they set about to unite the Christians in the sects. They began to bring disciples together as "Christians only but not the only Christians." It was a unity movement with much appeal and exciting success. In 1832 the movements led by Barton W. Stone and Alexander Campbell agreed to unite in spite of some major differences which were allowed by the ecumenical spirit.

As the movement progressed, many ideas about restoration of the church began to be taught. There began to be a real conflict between the aims of unity and restoration. Efforts to refine restoration concepts developed patternism and legalism. Restorationism began to supplant the unity efforts because of its divisive nature. Great conflicts arose as men tried to define all the necessary details of the pattern to be restored. A judgmental, exclusive spirit began to replace the irenic, accepting spirit of unity.

Some of the matters which developed into dividing issues were methods of raising money, missionary societies, the use of instrumental music, the use of choirs, the pastor system, and whether there were actually saved people among the sects. Many began to be judgmental refusing to accept other disciples because of differences in belief and practice.

Daniel Sommer was a forceful leader among those who opposed the things mentioned above and other “innovations.” Disciples of the area began having annual meetings at Sand Creek, Illinois in 1873. In one of those meetings of about 6,000 conservative disciples on August 18, 1889, during a long speech by Sommer, a document approved by five area churches was inserted, being read by Peter P. Warren. This document declared that those who continued to practice those innovations would no longer be regarded as brethren. That proved to be a sort of official announcement of the first division of the unity movement begun by Stone and the Campbells....

Through those earlier years of progress, some groups went under the name of Christian Church calling themselves Christians individually. Others accepted Christian Church for the group but called themselves Disciples of Christ individually. Still others designated themselves as the Church of Christ. Increasingly, after this point in history, the conservative disciples accepted the fellowship of the Church of Christ. Both the numbers and the distinctions grew so that seventeen years later, in 1906, the Church of Christ was listed in the United States census as a separate body for the first time.

Rejecting the thought that there might be Christians in the sects, this group abandoned the original purpose of the Campbells and began to teach unity through conformity to a supposed pattern set forth in the New Testament writings. Disagreements as to what that pattern authorizes and prohibits have led to a proliferation of splinter groups. Thus the unity plea has been negated by our practice.

The movement which progressed, claiming to be Christians only but not the only Christians and trying to unite the Christians among the sects, now had to deal with a group divided from it because of a complete turn-around. The Churches of Christ soon began to declare that there are no Christians among the sects and that we are the only Christians.

In making this change, the Church of Christ has become a sect itself or, actually, a group of disagreeing sects. When a group refuses to recognize other disciples as being brothers in Christ, that group has become sectarian. We became an identifiable body distinct from all others and we accepted a distinguishing (denominating) name which is used in the census, telephone directory, deeds, signs on our buildings, our letterheads, and advertisements. Although many of us try to avoid the use of the specific name Church of Christ by writing it church of Christ with the lower case c, that designation becomes a specific proper name also.

Are we of the various divisions of the Church of Christ the “one, true church”? Do any or all of them encompass all of God’s congregation of the saved? We are saved people but not all of the saved. When each of us obeyed the gospel, we were made a part of God’s universal congregation by the Lord’s own adding. Then when each of us accepted membership in a group which rejects others whom the Lord added, we joined a sectarian group. Even non-aligned persons who meet in “house churches” become sectarian when they refuse fellowship with all the saved. This all becomes very frightening because we endanger our individual salvation in creating and maintaining division by rejecting other brothers in Christ.

If there are no saved disciples among the sects, where are we going to find them? Which group can you point to as the Lord’s true congregation composed of all and only the saved? Our search cycles us back to the ecumenical aims of the Stone-Campbell Movement.

Whether you agree with me or not, I think that you can appreciate the suggestion that August 18, 1889 is the most likely specific date for the beginning of the Church of Christ. And we will have to concede that we are more “Sommerite” than “Campbellite”!

You do not hear much, if anything, about this because it is not something that we want to face. It is not something that feeds our pride. There have been no centennial celebrations. Rather than celebrating this centennial, I am pondering it wistfully. Rather than taking delight in this candid presentation of our history, I am hoping that somehow it will help you to recognize our party spirit and to extend your hand of fellowship across our sectarian lines. You can accept other disciples as brothers without endorsing or approving all that they believe and practice and without imposing your opinions and convictions on them.

We will hope that, if the Church of Christ endures for another hundred years, it will be able to celebrate its bi-centennial happily — as a part of God’s universal congregation claiming to be Christians only with no exclusive thoughts of being the only Christians.

(Researched history of our beginnings can be read in *Christians Only*, by James DeForest Murch, and *The Stone-Campbell Movement*, by Leroy Garrett.)

Chapter 25

Can Our Churches Unite?

It is unlikely that you ever have heard a preacher declare that he is against unity. All plead for unity. Each of us claims to be proclaiming that message which will produce that desired state. Even in the process of dividing, both parties to the division will strongly declare that they are striving for unity. It is like two countries fighting a war to bring about peace.

We have demonstrated convincingly that we are using the wrong methods to produce that much desired condition. Is there an effective method yet to be discovered and tried? Or, has one group of us been using the proper method all along which puts all others to blame for our splintered condition?

Is it possible for the churches of the Restoration Movement heritage to unite and, if they did, would they then be the exclusive, one, true church? If we can work out the divisive problems between these churches that are the nearest kin and have the most in common, then perhaps we can start working on the wider denominational problems.

We in the Church of Christ and Christian Church generally agree that, because each member was baptized into Christ, we were all added by the Lord to his one body. That is the unity accomplished by the Spirit, for “by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Cor. 12:13). So, we are united by the Lord in his universal church before we choose to go our separate ways in local groups which distinguish themselves from other disciples and wear identifying names. We denominate ourselves while admitting that we are in the Lord’s body. The Lord adds us to the universal church which is not the Church of Christ or Christian Church, but we choose to serve in these distinctive groups to which the Lord did not add us. Thus, our problem begins. We become judgmental of others whom the Lord has added and we serve dissociated from them. We fail to maintain the unity which the Lord created, considering many issues to be of greater importance than the unity which Jesus prayed for and died to create! We consider our opinions and convictions to be of higher priority than God’s will that we be one.

Division is more of an individual problem than a group problem. Our church groups cannot unite. If elders in the Church of Christ and Christian Church have authority over their congregations, they might choose to unite their corporate groups by working out some plan of unity. But elders have no such authority over the individual or group that would enable them to deliver their flocks. There is no national or universal structure to accomplish such a thing. And such a union would not necessarily include all who have been baptized into Christ.

There is no Scriptural teaching or precedent from which we can conclude that one congregation can extend fellowship to another church or withdrew fellowship from another group. We have made convenient classifications for congregational rejection: classes, charismatic claims, premillennialism, congregational cooperation, instrumental music, individual cups, etc. Such labels are not fitting in Christ’s church or in our vocabulary.

The unity of the Spirit is not in an organic structure. That unity is in the individuals in Christ who compose his congregation, or assembly, of the saved. That universal assembly of the firstborn ones is not given a name to identify it. Whether we agree to wear Christian Church or Church of Christ as a name is not an issue. One of the names is as non-scriptural as the other since the Lord gave us no name but his under which to rally.

Since we are saying that corporate groups have neither the authority nor the structure to unite, the question comes: "Can individuals unite?" Can they? Not really. The Lord and the Spirit have already done it for us!

As individuals, we can alienate ourselves from other believers by a judgmental and sectarian attitude, but we cannot really divide the church so that there are two churches of the Lord's people or two half-churches. The Scriptures do not speak of the possibility of the church being divided, as we express it commonly, for the church is essentially one. Individual alienations, though condemned, still do not put us in separate bodies. We are one! We must recognize that and work on the rejection and alienation within the church. Since alienation is an individual matter, reconciliation also is individual. You and I must erase our causes for rejecting and alienating so that we accept those who are in Christ individually. We must turn the judging and removing of candlesticks back to our Judge.

The Exit From Unity

We have tried repeatedly and disastrously to enter the door of reconciliation by conformity of doctrinal belief and practice. At the outset, this makes us become judgmental of others so that our convictions become the standard that all others must conform to in order to be united. That is the door of legal entanglements, constant wranglings over issues of varying dimensions, and division when there is disagreement. That is the exit from unity, not the entrance to it.

There is always disagreement. There is not conformity of belief in the least corporate group. Where love and acceptance prevail, diverse beliefs are no threat. Traditionally, we are drawn into our separate groups, not because we love, but because of agreeable doctrinal stance. Then, when one of the group fails to continue in agreement doctrinally, we find it harder to love that person. Thus, unity based on doctrinal agreement minimizes love! But love, rather than doctrinal conformity, is the essential element to keep us united in the one body. "Forbearing one another in love" is necessary for maintaining the unity of the Spirit (Eph. 4:1-3). If there were no differences, there would be nothing to forbear!

All must believe and obey the gospel in order to be in Christ, but those in him will always have different understanding about other doctrinal and practical matters such as circumcision, days, and meats. Paul would allow no alienation over these. In his epistles, Paul called for correction and reform, but he never advocated that the loyal disciples separate to start a pure church. "Come out and be separate," related to idolaters, not brothers in Christ. There were flagrant cases where persons were to be marked, but such life-or-death convictions as circumcision ("Except you be circumcised, you cannot be saved." Acts 15:1) were not allowed as grounds for alienation regardless of which way a person believed or practiced. Convictions about days and meats (Some call these opinions; but what is the difference in an opinion and a conviction?) were

not allowed as cause for judging one another. Conformity of conviction, or opinion, is not demanded, but acceptance of one another is demanded. We are permitted neither to condemn the one on our left nor to disdain the one on our right.

Conceding To The Weak Brothers

Some anti-instrumentalists say that if the instrumentalists are sincere about unity, they should be willing to give up the instruments for the sake of unity. They should concede to the weak (?) brother. These contenders reinforce this by reminding that instrumentalists generally admit that instrumental accompaniment is not necessary in worship. That may sound like a good point until the anti-instrumentalist is called upon to make the same kind of concessions for the sake of unity. He admits that Bible classes, women teachers, individual communion glasses, congregational cooperation, kitchens in church buildings, and paid congregational ministers are not necessary in serving the Lord. Is he willing to give all those things up for the sake of unity? To dismiss this by saying that only a small number of radicals hold those positions is to speak disdainfully of brothers and sisters for whom Jesus died. When the shoe is on the other foot, it is very uncomfortable and, if worn long enough, produces blisters and calluses. Just how serious is the proponent of that argument?

If each group conceded to everyone who held a more conservative position, the church, even if united, would be tied down by every imaginable scruple. We would be put under a yoke too grievous to be borne. The vegetarian can accuse the meat eater of forcing division in the church, but he finds himself to be the meat eater on other matters of conviction. God would not permit the scruples, or convictions, concerning circumcision, days, and meats to be bound on all. A believer could hold either view and practice on them but he could not bind his convictions on others. He would be guilty of forcing division by his condemnation of the liberty of others. The person who exercises his liberty is not divisive because he does not reject and condemn those who do not conform to his beliefs. The unity is maintained by mutual love, respect, and acceptance rather than by the binding of convictions and demanding conformity.

Getting people into a non-instrumental congregation wearing the revered name Church of Christ does not make unity. As one who spent a career in ministry in such groups, I must confess sadly that I have never known a group that conformed in belief or that went more than a very few years without serious disunity within the congregation. There is constant disagreement and alienation. If the Lord had conformity in mind when he prayed for unity, then we have failed him most miserably and are without hope.

We have failed in our efforts for unity because the message that we proclaim intended to promote unity is, by its very nature, divisive! Legalism demands conformity. Every point of belief and practice becomes a life-or-death issue, and it brings more death than life. Every person, according to the legal approach, must know, understand, and do everything taught in the New Testament Scriptures. That demands perfection which has little need for grace.

We have clearly and amply demonstrated that the demand for unity through conformity is not the right door to unity. Our emphasis on lawful correctness, instead of serving as the entrance to unity, has proven to be the exit from the unity that the Lord creates in his one body. With each

little scruple being given monumental significance, our efforts demanding conformity have continued to divide.

Unity Without Compromise

When each of us was accepted by the Lord and added to his saved group, that acceptance was not based upon our full understanding of all teachings and practical correctness. We were accepted upon our belief in, and obedience to, the gospel. Our unity is threatened and disrupted when we begin to ask, "Who is lawfully correct?", and we begin to judge each other. Sectarianism and exclusiveness are natural consequences. When we reject others whom Christ has accepted, we become sectarian in spirit and practice.

When we begin to resolve our alienation on an individual basis, things begin to clear up, even though there are no easy and simplistic solutions. When a disciple begins to love and accept all whom the Lord accepted and added, then the walls of separation begin to crumble. That does not mean that the person has compromised his or her convictions. The uncircumcised need not be circumcised nor must the circumcised disavow his circumcision. The vegetarian is not compelled to eat meat, nor is the meat eater to become a vegetarian. Those who observe days are not called upon to stop it, nor must others begin to keep holy days. The persons who use only one cup in communion are not required to begin using individual cups, nor are all required to use only one cup. The anti-instrumentalist need not violate his conscience by singing with accompaniment, and the instrumentalists need not sing only a cappella. Those who practice congregational cooperation need not discontinue the practice and those who do not cooperate congregationally need not begin the practice. Those who designate themselves as Christian Church need not change their signs and letter-heads to read Church of Christ, and visa-versa.

On an individual basis, we must refuse any longer to judge others along party lines in recognition of sectarian fences. We can visit with those from whom we have been separated and let them know that we are sorry for our alienating attitude, that we no longer sit as their judges, that we are happy to know that they are fellow servants of our Lord, and that we want to encourage them, support them, and cooperate with them in promoting the cause of Christ. Yes, we can continue to invite discussion of the matters of disagreement, but that discussion will be on an accepting basis rather than an adversary basis.

When the individual attitudes are changed, then the walls of separation in the corporate structures will begin to disappear. Praise the Lord, those walls are already falling! The Spirit is working great change among our people. I am optimistic that, because of the leavening action of this present generation, the disciples of the Twenty-first Century may be spared the disastrous disunity that has characterized the Restoration Movement churches of the Twentieth Century.

No, the Christian Church and the Church of Christ cannot unite because they are already in the one body. But individual attitudes can be changed that will resolve the alienation and dissolve the walls of difference in separate factions. As you proclaim unity and pray for it, please let this mind be in you.

Chapter 26

Can The Cause of Sickness Be The Cure?

Some friends came for a visit one evening. As time went by and we all became hungry, we ordered pizzas. They were spicy and tempting, and I soon found myself to be over-stuffed. In the night my discomfort went into indigestion and progressed to nausea and vomiting. It was a miserable night with no relief. About five o'clock in the morning, I waked my wife to tell her that the nausea was unbearable but that I thought I had a remedy for it. I asked her to warm up some of the left-over pizza and I ate three pieces in order to cure my sickness. Then I felt much better.

“Now, wait a minute,” you may be thinking, “if pizza made you sick it surely would not be the remedy to make you well!” And you would be right. So, don't believe the above.

One of the spicy pizzas which brought sickness and division into the Restoration Movement was the effort to determine by law whether instrumental accompaniment to singing in worship was scriptural, unscriptural, or anti-scriptural. The more that issue was discussed, the more devastating was the result as a definite breach was made among disciples. That sickness has remained with us into the final decade of this century. What will be the remedy to make us whole again?

In the last few decades little was heard about the use of instrumental music in our churches as the issue had gone to sleep, as it were, even though the division remained. But more recently, discussions of unity within the Restoration heritage have revived the old issue. Now it is a rewarmed topic of debate intended to cure the damage it caused in the last century. Can the very thing that caused the division become a cure for it a hundred years later? Have new arguments been devised to determine if it is scriptural, unscriptural, or anti-scriptural? I think not. I think that a different treatment is needed. Let me be bold enough to give my diagnosis of our malady and to prescribe a cure.

Our real problem is not instrumental music or cups, classes, women teachers, congregational cooperation, the millennium, paid ministry, or other such doctrinal and practical matters. It goes back to our basic concept of “Scriptural authority” which supposedly demands, specifies, and regulates our worship and to the misunderstanding that worship is a segmented part of our lives exercised only at certain times in ritualistic performances. This misdirection stems from the concepts of legalism which have had a strangle hold on us. Legalism is the deadly virus that has brought destructive division into our beloved heritage. Legalism is not just the keeping of laws or rules but the dependence upon the keeping of them for justification and sanctification — our right standing before God.

Worship is not a legal requirement but a response to the grace of God appreciated in our lives. Worship is not a fulfillment of law but a privilege given to all men in all ages of man's history. Worship originates in the heart; worshipful actions are only efforts to express what the heart feels. There is no sacramental value derived from expressing those feelings.

“Authorized Worship”

“Authorized worship” is a concept which we have borrowed from the code of law given to Israel which specified in detail the rituals to be performed. Those rituals were given to a special people for a special time and purpose. They all pointed to Christ in whom they were fulfilled. Jesus was offered in fulfillment of all the types of the law. Through our identity with him, when Jesus offered himself, we may think of our being offered to God in totality in him because he brought us to God. In this reconciled state we are presented to God in a new relationship “*in Spirit and in Truth!*” The legal type is replaced by a spiritual relationship because he brought us to God. He has presented us as living sacrifices — living and constant offerings, whole-life offerings of worship and service.

We say with Paul, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I that live, but Christ who lives in me...” (Gal. 2:20). Paul explains, “And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Cor. 4:15). Christ has cleansed and sanctified us to be presented to himself. We are presented or offered continually and wholly as a living offering/sacrifice. So now, “*Whatever* you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col. 3:17). This inclusiveness of *whatever* we do relieves the perplexing decisions concerning our various scruples, for “He who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. He who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God; while he who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. None of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (Rom. 14:6-8). You may enlarge on this brief, sketchy statement that expresses our “Scriptural authority” for whole-life worship.

It is no longer a matter of going somewhere to worship or of performing certain acts of service because the entire life and total being is an offering. While it is true that praying or singing praises may be more formal and emotional expressions toward God than cooking dinner or planting corn, these and all other activities of the child of God are accomplishing the same purpose of honoring God as Lord of our lives. We honor God by providing for our family as well as in formal praise. An obedient child honors his mother by taking out the garbage as well as by saying, “Mom, I love you.” In this context, the difference in serving God and worshipping him formally fades, and the question of what can and cannot be done in serving and in worship is deprived of practical significance.

In the Nineteenth Century as the *Restoration Movement*, as it came to be called, was developing its course and identifying its purpose, it veered from its beginning direction in three ways. It began to look upon the New Covenant scriptures as another legal code. Law demands specifics. Specific law establishes patterns. When the pattern is not followed perfectly, restoration is necessary. These concepts foster an endless chain of debate as to what the law requires, what the pattern is, and when the perfect is restored. Thus, *legalism*, *patternism*, and *restorationism*, the things we have espoused in our misdirected plea for unity, are divisive by their very nature. We have demonstrated that divisiveness in every generation, but we continue to eat pizza to cure our indigestion! Removing Jesus as the focal point of unity, this concept replaced unity in Christ with unity through conformity to a perceived pattern.

Most of us of the Restoration heritage have been nurtured from spiritual infancy on legalism, patternism, and restorationism. Our whole frame of reference is off course. We have become so conditioned to relate every question to law that, after we have begun to recognize our justification by grace rather than through law, we still find ourselves gnawing at the warmed over pizza to solve current ailments. I may be trying yet to prove my premise in this essay by law. Our hermeneutic has been oriented to legalism.

No more legal authority is required for you to love and honor God than for you to love and honor your mother. These are not accomplished by command. “Mom, I’m calling to wish you a happy Mother’s Day because I am commanded to honor you!” “We have met to pray and sing praises to you, dear God, because you have commanded us to do it!” Can you not see the absurdity of the concept of legal worship? “Commanded worship” fosters ritualism and sacramentalism.

Inherent in man is a desire to worship a spirit higher than himself. God made man to be a worshipful creature, and God has always permitted man to express his devotion even when there is no law which specifies it. *God has never refused the sincere worship of anyone even though the acts performed were neither commanded nor specified!* Now, hold on! Don’t jump on your horse and ride off in all four directions at once! I can well understand how you would reject that statement with indignation. It has taken the Spirit many years to get me to begin to comprehend such a thought.

What about the worship of Cain, Nadab and Abihu, and the vain worshippers of Jesus’ day? Cain worshipped with an evil heart of hatred toward his brother (1 John 3:12), and the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination (Prov. 15:8). Nadab and Abihu defied God rather than humbly trying to honor him. The Jews sought to evade God’s law by following their own traditions. Their hearts far from him, they were not sincerely trying to honor God. Let me urge you to investigate any other example of rejected worship to see whether it was the act that was condemned or the heart of the worshipper. Those condemned for “doing what was right in their own eyes” were setting aside God’s revealed code given through Moses and following their own perverted wills. We are giving no license to any such attitude.

The Privilege of Praise

In various ages we see persons offering unspecified (unauthorized!) acts of worship that were accepted. *All people of all ages have been granted the privilege of praise.* God has accepted, and expected, sincere worship even from those who had no direct or written revelation. He has looked upon the heart of the worshipper more than the technique of his praise. Men have been permitted to worship in formal procedures that expressed the feeling of the worshipper’s heart so long as it (1) accomplished the purpose of praise, (2) was up-building to others present, (3) avoided sacramental and idolatrous concepts, (4) did not venerate objects, and (5) did not set aside what God had prescribed. Let us look at some Biblical precedents that give basis to this premise. We have tended to overlook or misapply these.

There is no indication that Abel was commanded either to make an offering or to offer from his flock. He was a man of faith, and because of it he and his sacrifice were acceptable (Heb. 11:4). We must no longer misapply Romans 10:17 in an effort to prove that God instructed him.

When it is stated that, in the time of Enosh, “men began to call upon the name of the Lord” (Gen. 4:26), and when Abram “built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord” (Gen. 12:8), there is no indication that they did this in response to a command or specification of God.

Jacob took the stone he had used for a pillow, made an altar of it, and poured an offering of oil on it in spontaneous worship without “authority” from God (Gen. 28:18). On another occasion, Jacob set up an altar and poured a drink offering and oil on it (Gen. 35:14).

Samuel drew water and poured it out before Jehovah and fasted (1 Sam. 7:6). David took the water brought from Bethlehem and poured it out to the Lord (2 Sam. 23:16). Where was their command to do that?

Without instruction from the Law of Moses, the Jews had added wine to the Passover (Luke 22:14-18; Matt. 26:26-28), dancing before the Lord (2 Sam. 6:12f; Psalms 149:3), and the entire synagogue service. Rather than being condemned for those unauthorized activities of worship, they were privileged to serve/worship in those ways. Unscriptural activities are not necessarily anti-scriptural.

Paul commended the Athenians, declaring, “For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:23). Although their understanding of God’s nature was very limited and they knew not any code of laws from him, they had the privilege of worship. Paul did not condemn their devotion to the “unknown god” but enlarged on their understanding about his identity.

In Chapter 1 of Romans, Paul declared that the Gentiles were without excuse because, having known God as revealed in nature, they “did not honor him as God or give thanks to him...” (v. 21), “and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (v. 25). How could they have properly honored God, given thanks of praise to him, and worshipped and served the Creator since they had no revealed law? *God has given all men, even the uninstructed, the privilege of praise and worship!*

In the New Testament writings we see numerous “unauthorized” actions of worship which were undemanded, unrehearsed, spontaneous, and extravagant; yet they met with approval. Although these were not done in Christian assemblies, they were expressions of approved worship and they illustrate the principle of acceptable worship.

The Wise Men offered birthday gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to Jesus without evident instructions to do so (Matt. 2:1-11). It was their privilege to praise through that means.

There are several instances of people falling before Jesus and worshipping him without rebuke for their impulsive action. They had no command or instruction to worship in such a manner. An adoring crowd took their coats and leafy branches of trees and spread them before Jesus (Matt. 21:8f). We do homage to God by bowing before him or by lifting up our hands to him. If the amen of approval at the end of a prayer is a part of the worship, so would the clapping of approval of the sentiment expressed in a song be worship also.

Mary was neither rebuked for anointing Jesus without authorization nor considered presumptuous in using nard without instruction to do so (John 12:1f).

The sinful woman was not commanded to wash Jesus' feet with tears nor to use her hair as a towel (Luke 7:36-50). She was exercising her privilege of spontaneous worship.

According to the rules we have made, Paul sinned in cutting his hair in a ritual relating to a vow (Acts 21:23-16) and when he purified himself ritually and arranged for an offering in accordance to the Law of Moses. We would also have to censor the Judean disciples who "are zealous for the law".

With the sacrifice of Jesus, God did not suddenly come to hate the worship rituals of the law. Disciples could still keep those rituals of worship so long as they did not seek justification by those means. Neither should we assume that, when Jesus died, God began to hate praise which was accompanied by instruments, which thing he had accepted for centuries. Who are we to limit what God likes or dislikes when he has accepted many different expressions of devotion?

Our great stress has been on the need for authority for all that we do *in worship*. We have emphasized the ritualistic aspect of worship. But where is our authority for segmenting worship from our daily and constant offering of self in whole-life worship? Where do the scriptures say that our assemblies for edification are to be changed into "worship services" with a different set of rules to govern them? Where do we read such expressions as "go to worship" (regarding Christian assemblies), "begin our worship service," "after the worship is over," and "missing worship"? Where do we read of the "five acts of worship" or a list of specified activities for our assemblies? Where do we find a limitation of the means whereby we may praise God and edify one another, either in or out of assemblies? Has our privilege of praise been granted in only a few activities? Is it a *privilege of praise* or a fulfillment of the *demands of law to praise*? Do we worship only in rituals? Are assemblies for the purpose of performance of rituals?

What I am proposing is no license to go hog-wild. Even though a watermelon seed spitting contest may fit into our whole-life service to God, it would be impossible to justify it as a form of edification or praise in an assembly. Even though no dishonoring act is permitted in daily life, all permissible conduct, such as taking a bath, is not upbuilding to others or a formal expression of worship. And because a thing is permitted does not mean that it must be practiced by all.

Incense and candles (lamps! Candles are a more modern invention.) were symbolic of prayer and worship throughout Bible history. Are they distasteful to God now? Perhaps he considers them immature. We should be able to understand that worship is more personal, mental, and expressive of feeling. We need no artificialities to create and express our feelings even though God has allowed and prescribed many physical reinforcements throughout history.

It is possible to express devotion to God acceptably through dancing, for David did just that. Who is to deny that one may worship in that manner today? You might express yourself to God in that way; however, interpretative dance, or any other activity, must be understood in order to upbuild. Being the unsophisticated person that I am, I can hardly distinguish between

interpretative dancing and aerobics. Therefore, performance before an undiscerning assembly of my kind would be subject to the same regulation as Paul placed on the speaking in tongues.

Where Is The Pattern?

Where do the scriptures outline an exclusive and inclusive pattern for local organization or of the activities to be carried on when a group meets together? There are instructions and examples for saints to assemble for edification, but no prescribed pattern is given for those meetings which specifies 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, to give and hear announcements for the common good, 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 purposes, 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 a “church building.” There is no code of law that gives legal details which must be fulfilled in these matters.

In 1 Corinthians 14, the purpose of edification in assemblies is emphasized: “Let all things be done for edification!” Do you leave your assemblies feeling stronger than when you arrived? Do you receive anything that relates to your deep concerns or gives you courage to face the coming week? Catchy tunes which express little meaning, rote prayers, casual communion, and doctrinal or negative preaching allow many to leave with an unfulfilled hunger and a depressed spirit. It is high time for us to give more attention to the relevance and content of the service than to the strict pattern of it.

Even the teaching and admonishing to be accomplished by psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs is not a part of a blueprint for assemblies. These exhortations to sing are given in context with other exhortations toward proper social conduct rather than in context with “worship services.” They say nothing about congregational singing. 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 only secular songs or the songs of the drinking party under the influence of intoxicating spirits, they were exhorted to be filled with the Spirit and to upbuild each other with spiritual songs. If you are inclined to reject this, please read Ephesians 5-6 and Colossians 3-4 again. Be honest with yourself! These exhortations are not a part of a legal pattern for worship in assemblies.

Surely, we are not free to disregard any directive or exhortation relating to any matter which applies to us. Precedents may be followed with assurance. Warnings and corrective instructions must be heeded. But to interpret these as a legal code in which we must discover the specifics of an inclusive and exclusive pattern is to go back to our original cause of uncertainty and division. That approach is the cause of our problem and cannot be the cure. It is a misguided concept of “Scriptural authority” which ignores that all that we are and have are devoted fully to God in worship/service.

My purpose in this essay is not to bring instruments into the assemblies where I meet or elsewhere. I am saying that the contentions about instruments, classes, cups, kitchens, congregational cooperation, and other matters over which we have divided have been argued from the standpoint of law. Our "Scriptural authority" concept is derived from our thinking of the New Covenant Scriptures as another code of law and, consequently, the belief that our justification and sanctification are through keeping tenets and rituals of law.

Unsettling as it is for most of us, when we can see the misdirection of legalism, patternism, and restorationism, we can begin to discover the true meaning of our relationship with God in Christ. Then our legalistic arguing and debating over these issues which we have created will be replaced by acceptance of one another, a broadened fellowship, and a praise of God with one voice.

Continued contentions based upon the concept of law will only create and perpetuate divisions. No, the cause of our sickness cannot be the cure also for the malady it brought.

Chapter 27

When Life Begins

This is not to be another essay denouncing the horrible abortion epidemic that has swept America in our generation. This deals with a doctrinal dilemma.

I am presuming that you believe in and respect the sanctity of human life that begins at conception. Even though some may question that a new life is formed at the very moment of conception, they can set no definite time between conception and birth as the point of its beginning, and few will contend that it is only at birth that a new human life is initiated.

Here is the doctrinal dilemma. We have taught with much emphasis that a person, in being born of the water and the Spirit, is not in a newness of life until baptism. We have contended that life does not begin with faith, but at baptism. Even though the new birth is analogous to the physical birth, we have been saying that physical life begins at conception and that spiritual life begins at birth.

A baby does not suddenly come to life at birth. Birth does not bestow or initiate life. Birth is the result of life that began at conception. During gestation there are varying stages of development in reaching the point of parturition, or birth. Birth is a confirmation of what has been taking place in the womb and an initiation of the life into a different environment, but it does not make non-life into life.

Because life begins in the womb does not mean that it will be born. It may be aborted at any stage of development, or it may be stillborn. Traditionally, we have not thought of the earliest stages of life as having individuality. In later stages, miscarriages and stillborns have been given names and burials.

Spiritual life is initiated when the sinner begins to believe the gospel. With the first assenting faith, a person becomes a disciple of Christ — a learner. Being begotten, or conceived, by the gospel, a person's faith should continue to develop to the stage of obedience. However, it may be aborted at any point, and the person may never be born of the water and the Spirit. As long as the person is growing in belief, and not disbelieving, there is continued life. If that person dies on the way to the baptistry, he dies as a disciple, and there is assurance that God will receive that life. If that learner's faith is aborted, there can be no hope.

Baptism does not give life. The life begins with the conception. Baptism confirms the changes that have been working in the individual in that life process. It becomes a public declaration of the saving faith of the disciple, and the Spirit is given as a seal or witness. Baptism is an initiation into a new environment and relationship. Without baptism the life ends. But baptism does not initiate the life. If the believer refuses baptism, he refuses the continuation of his life. In similar manner, the freedom of Israel from Egypt began and progressed in their faith, their preparation to leave, the Passover, and their move toward the Red Sea. It was confirmed and finalized by their crossing the sea. They could have stopped their progress and/or turned back on either side of the Red Sea.

Traditionally, we have let Catholic sacramental concepts influence our thinking concerning baptism. A sacrament is considered to be a specific ritual through which God pours a special grace into the soul. We have long contended that the grace of life is poured into our souls at the moment of baptism while we taught inconsistently at the same time that we are begotten by the word of God. There can be different stages of life but not two beginnings.

Rather than ruling out the necessity of baptism, my teaching here only modifies its meaning and importance. Salvation is by faith which is accepting and obedient. When one reaches a point of disbelieving or disobeying, he no longer has saving faith. The believer who refuses to be baptized reaches that point.

In both the physical and spiritual realms, life begins at conception rather than at birth. Birth does not give life.

Chapter 28

Abortion: Law or Principle

When we see a green light at an intersection, we perceive it as a representation of the law saying, “You may go.” In the red light we see the law commanding, “Stop!” Generally, the green light may be understood to be a positive yes and the red light may be interpreted as a dogmatic no; yet those lights actually are intended to promote the higher purposes of safety, orderliness, and courtesy in all situations.

The rules may be bent in many ways to accomplish the purpose of the law. For instance, the liberty of the green light is surrendered and its demand to proceed is ignored when a child dashes out in front of you, and the red light is disregarded cautiously when you are rushing a victim of a heart attack to the hospital. The driver must be guided by the higher principle of the law at all times. We must look for more than just green and red lights.

It is easier to keep specific legal regulations than to make responsible decisions based upon the principles that laws are intended to promote. If our effort to keep arbitrary law hinders or prevents our acting upon the higher principles of justice, mercy, and love, then we have misunderstood the purpose of the precept and have acted as true legalists.

In making the hard choices relating to many of our complicated problems, the proper decision can best be made by asking and answering, “What is the most loving, just, and merciful alternative for those involved?” As I have elaborated on this concept before, especially as it relates to abortion and letting the terminally ill person die with dignity, several of my friends have expressed concern about the teaching. Let me add a few thoughts about law and principle as they apply to those two matters of great concern.

Legalism demands dogmatic answers — a yes or a no without qualification. If I declare dogmatically that all abortion is sinful (Red! Stop!), I leave no place for justice, mercy, or love to be applied. Law and grace are not compatible. If I say, “Abortion is a sin except when it is necessary to save the life of the mother (or any other exception),” then I abandon unbending law and I favor abortion in certain situations where higher principles prevail. Law allows no exceptions, but in applying principles, circumstances alter cases. Where law says no, principles may say usually not.

The admission of any exceptions would eliminate law as the sole basis of my decision. Most of us are willing to let principles prevail in other matters that are less emotionally perceived than abortion is now. For instance, almost all of us agree that killing another human being is sinful except in defending our family or for some other noble purpose. In our legalistic conditioning, we have become inconsistent — dogmatic only on our current hangups. Our inherent sense of justice lets the principles of law prevail in other cases even as the scrupulous Jew would labor in lifting an unfortunate animal out of a well on the Sabbath.

Law demands definite answers, but few problems have simple solutions. Efforts to bind dogmatic, simplified answers have often lacked in justice and mercy and have always proven to be divisive.

It is unfair to conclude that the application of principles rather than law would be a tool to use against the unborn, the terminally ill, or the helpless person in any circumstance.

No, abortion is not mentioned in the Bible; however, that does not mean that there are no principles set forth which would apply to it as well as to every other circumstance of life. The reference in Exodus 21:22f addresses involuntary miscarriages. There is as much difference in bringing forth by abortion and miscarriage as there is between dying of murder and cancer.

When does life begin? Rather, when did life begin? All human life began in Adam. Conception and birth only continue that life. Each sperm and each ovary are alive. When they unite, they begin a new individual body but not new life. When does a new personhood begin? I do not make a dogmatic pronouncement for none is given in the Scriptures. God knew David in the womb but he also spoke of John the Baptist centuries before his coming. Does that mean that John existed as a person in the time of the prophets who foretold his coming?

Again, I do not have all the simplified answers, so I try to discern the highest principles with which to consider each case. That course is not as easy as giving an inflexible, merciless “Thou shalt” or “Thou shalt not.”

I choose to answer to God for showing mercy rather than for giving judgments of law, “For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy; yet mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:13).

Chapter 29

Human Chattel

The notable Dred Scott Case brought before our courts in 1856-57 addressed the right of a Negro slave and his child born in free territory to become citizens of the United States. Scott sued for citizenship on the ground that he was taken from Missouri to live in the free territory of Minnesota, where his child was born, before being brought back to Missouri. The lower courts ruled that he had no standing before the court. On March 6, 1857, the United States Supreme Court upheld the lower court decision that Negro slaves and/or their descendants could not be citizens and that they had no rights before the court.

The written majority opinion was of more concern than the decision of the court. The opinion contended that Scott was mere chattel which might be dealt with by its owner as any other property. That historic opinion did much to widen the breach between North and South and to hasten the Civil War.

A present-day case which also began in the courts of Missouri was decided by the United States Supreme Court on January 22, 1973. In effect, the decision of the Roe vs. Wade Case declares that the unborn child has no rights before the court and that it may be dealt with as nothing more than chattel.

Now, fortified by that decision, the abortionists raise the popular cry that the unborn child is a part of the woman's body, that she has the right over her own body, and that she can deal with it as she pleases, even to the termination of its life.

With their humanitarian views, the Abolitionists pressed for the human rights of slaves at a time when many of the citizens of our country denied that a Negro had a soul. He was not considered to be a human being.

Strangely, now those who contend for the equal rights for women, minorities, and the blacks both in America and South Africa are denying that the unborn child has a soul or human rights. It is not considered to be a human being.

Although it is said to be a part of the woman's body, the fetus is not even esteemed as highly as an eye, a hand, or a finger. It would be considered inhuman to destroy one of those parts for any reason short of necessity. The fetus is given about the same consideration as a tumor or an inflamed appendix. To sterilize a woman as a preventative to pregnancy is considered to be a destruction of her human rights, but to terminate her pregnancy is thought to be neither inhuman nor destructive of the infant's rights.

We hear little from the abortionists about the sins of fornication and adultery. Rather, they contend that freedom of sexual activity of the unwed is another human right which we dare not discourage. Promiscuity is encouraged by our society as a whole. With the abandonment of sexual morality has come a disregard for the life that results from the lack of sexual restraint. When we abandon the concept of sin, we deny responsibility.

Slave owners were “pro-choice,” contending that the choice of whether to own slaves or not was a private and personal matter and that one’s personal values should not be pushed onto others. The “pro-choice” ideology was urged to protect slavery then, and it is designed to destroy life now. God is “pro-choice,” demanding that we choose to refrain from the sexual activity that might result in a an unwanted pregnancy.

Both the slave and the fetus are human in essence, an essence which is not measured by degree of maturity, legal standing, or possession.

Who would have thought that, more than a century after the Emancipation Proclamation and the Civil War, we would hear the infamous decision of the Dred Scott Case revived so loudly and adamantly? Once it was the slave and his child who had no rights or soul; now it is the unborn child who has neither rights nor soul. In those times a master could deal with his slave as chattel; now the unborn is regarded as a disposable property possessed by the mother — a part of her body which she can destroy without conscience.

Chapter 30

The Hope of Israel

Because long nurtured expectations die hard, the road to Emmaus is crowded. Those who a few days earlier were shouting “Hosanna!” and spreading palm branches for their king soon would lament, “But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21). Their hope for the restored throne of David over Israel died at Calvary.

Cleopas’ unfounded anticipation of an earthly king and kingdom allowed him to disregard the greatest event of history which he had already heard about — the resurrection of Jesus. After Jesus had revealed himself to them alive for forty days, the expectation of the disciples had revived so that they would ask Jesus, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6).

We are disappointed in the disciples. After having heard all of Jesus’ teachings and parables about the spiritual nature of his kingdom and having heard him declare plainly, “My kingdom is not of this world,” they still expected that he would reign on earth. Surely, the resurrection had qualified him to be king. Was the restoration of the Jews and their kingdom the hope of Israel? If so, it was an unfounded hope. Is that the present hope of Israel? If so, it is an unfounded hope.

On Pentecost, Peter declared that God raised Jesus from the dead to sit upon David’s throne, that the gates of glory opened to receive the exalted king, and that he took his place at the right hand of God as both Lord and Christ. Then Peter introduced people into the spiritual kingdom by the new birth. The earthly was superseded by the spiritual.

In spite of all this, many Christians today are spreading the palm branches for Jesus, shouting hosannas to their proposed king, and excitedly proclaiming his imminent return to reign over a restored nation of Israel on a literal throne for one thousand years. They, too, are destined to walk the road to Emmaus with Cleopas. How sad!

What is the hope of Israel? We need not guess about this for Paul tells us plainly what the true hope of Israel is. When Paul arrived in Rome as a prisoner, he called the Jews to him and explained, “It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain” (Acts 28:20). Was Paul imprisoned for promoting an earthly restoration of Israel? The Jews would not have imprisoned him for that. Before the Jewish council in Jerusalem, Paul had declared, “With respect to the hope of the resurrection of the dead I am on trial” (Acts 23:6). As his hearing continued before Felix and Ananias, Paul added, “But this I admit to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the law or written in the prophets, having a hope in God which these themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust” (Acts 24:14f). In his defense before Agrippa with Festus present, Paul plainly identified the hope of Israel: “And now I stand here on trial for hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by the Jews, O king! Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead?” (Acts 26:6f). So as

Paul finally addressed the unbelieving Jews in Rome, he could declare confidently, “For this reason therefore I have asked to see you and speak with you, since it is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain” (Acts 28:20). The hope of the resurrection was and is the true hope of Israel!

Through Abraham God called out a people through whom the Christ would come. God gave earthly, national promises which he fulfilled until their forfeiture by the rejection of Christ. He also gave a spiritual promise to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham’s descendent, Jesus. Because misunderstanding Jews looked for a restoration of the earthly kingdom, if Paul had accepted that as the hope of Israel, he would have had Jewish support instead of their persecution. But he met opposition while he declared such things as “you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call...” (Eph. 4:4). While we recognize that there are different facets to our hope, they are all reflective of the fact that Jesus arose from the dead and that he will also raise us. If the Jew has a hope that the Gentile does not have, there is more than one hope. The true hope of Israel is not for a restoration of national Israel and an earthly reign of Christ through a millennium.

Although there are many references in the scriptures relating to the hope of Israel which cannot be included in this short discourse, we can see the matter dealt with convincingly in the third chapter of Philippians. Here Paul’s understanding is made very clear. Let’s look at it.

Paul warned about those who put confidence in the flesh — fleshly Israel with the identifying mark of circumcision and the fleshly, earthly promises. While the Judaizer looked for earthly fulfillment, Paul declared that believers are the true Israel with a spiritual relationship with the Father. He had no more confidence in his fleshly relationship. Once he could, and did, boast of his Jewish pedigree and achievement. He had every commendation that any Jew could hope for. He was blameless in keeping their law and zealous in protecting Jewish claims against supposed enemies like Jesus. He had better fleshly claims to give him confidence than any others could boast of.

The road to Emmaus was one of disappointment because of the (supposedly) dead Jesus. The road to Damascus brought shock of blinding light because of the risen Christ. Paul, as one born out of season, saw the living Savior!

Because of this experience, Paul trashed all his former claims and confidence. “Whatever gain I had, I counted loss for the sake of Christ.” He could not claim Christ through his Jewishness. He had to junk it. Law keeping was an effort of achieving righteousness, but the law offered no hope of a resurrection. God had promised to bless all nations through Abraham’s seed, the Christ, who was to be received by faith, not by law or fleshly relationships. Paul gladly divested himself of all national hopes “that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”

Realizing that his glorification with Christ had not yet been attained, he pressed on toward that prize. It was an upward, heavenly call, not one to be fulfilled on earth. Forgetting national hopes which were in the past (not future), “one thing I do” — claim the prize of life in the One who triumphed over death. That was the one hope; that was the hope of Israel which, when proclaimed to his earthly minded, nationalistic Jewish brethren, brought him chains.

“Let those of us who are mature be thus minded” rather than developing fantastic theories about fleshly Israel being restored. We are the true circumcision, those distinguished as God’s chosen people. “Our commonwealth (or citizenship) is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself.”

To secure the hope of Israel, Paul cast upon the garbage heap all fleshly benefits, claims due to Jewish identity, confidence in righteousness by keeping the law, and all hope of earthly fulfillment of the promises to Abraham. How foolish it is for those who have begun in the spirit to seek a culmination in the flesh — to stand upon Paul’s garbage heap and proclaim a restoration, or recycling, of that trash which would necessarily be restored with Israel.

Paul divested himself “that I may know him and the power of his resurrection.” By that power Jesus was declared to be the son of God (Rom. 1:4). Jesus might claim to atone for us but only his victory over death had the power to prove it. It was the dynamic to demonstrate the grace of God to all men regardless of nationality. God’s raising him up enables him to come in glory to raise us also.

What is the blessed hope? The conversion of the Jews as a nation? A restored earthly kingdom? A reign of Christ on earth for a thousand years? Jesus leading a literal army in bloody combat? Paul speaks of “awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13). The risen Savior promises to come in glory to raise and glorify us.

That is the hope of Israel.

Chapter 31

The Great Temptation of Jesus

This essay is not another denunciation of the infamous movie, “The Last Temptation of Christ,” that created such an uproar of indignation last year. This lesson will address some very popular misconceptions of disciples about the kingdom of Christ and his eternal purpose. These may have more serious implications than that movie could ever have.

The eternal Word had an impelling purpose which would motivate him to divest himself of his heavenly status and to come to this earth in human form. It was the will of the Father that he do so, yet we are not to conclude that it was against the will of the Word to become his Son. His purpose was to bear the guilt of the sins of mankind by giving himself as an atonement. This was planned “before the foundation of the world” (1 Pet. 1:21). So his purpose from the beginning pointed to the cross.

Although we cannot be sure if the developing Jesus came to understand his mission clearly during his childhood, we can be sure that he realized the full meaning of it when he began his ministry. If the Son of God could be tempted, that would be his most apparent area of vulnerability. His temptation was to avoid the cross which loomed so ominously before him.

At the outset of his ministry, after God acknowledged him when he was baptized, Satan tempted him. What temptation would be worthy of divinity? Certainly it was not the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, or the vainglory of life as we have interpreted so trivially. Satan set out to defeat his purpose to seek and to save the lost which would demand the cross. What appeals could Satan offer?

First, he let Jesus feel human need. Lesser men have endured fasting longer even as did the Irish patriots who starved themselves in 1981. There would have been no sin in eating food or for the Creator to turn stones into food.

In this temptation the devil seems to be saying, “Now you know how it feels to be hungry and suffer with humanity. Millions are hungry, sick, cold, homeless, and in various other miseries. You have the power to remedy this. Make bread and earthly supplies to relieve them. Hear their cry. You can make this earth into a paradise.” But Jesus is responding, “Man cannot live by the bread of earthly relief alone. He must have spiritual healing which can only come through the cross. A renewed Eden on earth is not the answer.”

Then Jesus looked down from the height of the temple upon the people who would be crying out for his crucifixion within three years. He had the power to awe them into obedience by his miraculous demonstrations. In that state of submission, none would have cried out for his death; so, the cross would have been avoided, leaving man in his sin. It would have compromised sin instead of atoning for it.

In the third facet of this one great temptation, after he is shown all the kingdoms of the world in panorama, Satan seems to be saying, “If you will join forces with me with all your infinite power

and wisdom, you can easily rule over all mankind. If you resist me, there will be rebellion, suffering, and sorrow in continual alienation from God.” Even though an earthly, materialistic kingdom would avoid the cross, it would be a perpetual reign over a world lost in sin.

After the temptation, the devil left him for a time. Jesus looked resolutely to the cross. But then his hour drew near. He faced at least temporary abandonment by God in death, not just physical death, but spiritual death as the penalty of all sin, which is separation from God in hell. He could bear physical pain as any human could, but the facing of unconquered hell brought the awesome trauma in the Garden of Gethsemane which caused him to pray for some possible way for his mission to be accomplished without drinking that dreadful cup. The devil was still torturing him with that great temptation. His strong crying was heard. He was sustained by angels. After crying out on the cross, “God, why have you forsaken me?” he could then say in relief, “It is finished!” His purpose in coming was fulfilled.

There has been a very popular revival of premillennial teachings in the last few years. The multitude is spreading the palm branches and shouting, “Hosanna!” with the same intent of making Jesus an earthly king that those sincere disciples had when they welcomed him into Jerusalem. Even after all his many parables explaining the spiritual nature of his reign, they still wanted to crown him as a civil ruler on an earthly, governmental throne. That is what the devil had been tempting him to become! That would have enabled him to avoid the cross! The world would still have been in sin!

It is being taught that Jesus came to set up the Jewish kingdom but that his plan was frustrated by the rejection of the Jews; so he set up the church phase of the kingdom instead while postponing the real kingdom until he comes again. Such a claim implies that if the plan to establish his kingdom had not been thwarted by their rejecting and crucifying him, he would not have died on the cross! Are modern voices joining Satan’s in the great temptation?

The Jews did not reject and kill Jesus because he wanted to restore the throne of David but because he declared himself to be the Son of God and the savior of the world. They would have welcomed him as a king but not as a savior. Their cross which would make him the savior and the spiritual king would become foolishness to those who wished for earthly restoration.

If the Jews could thwart the plans of God, was the cross in the plan from the beginning? If it came as a result of man’s rejection, then the cross of atonement was an improvisation rather than a part of God’s eternal plan. Peter ruled out any thought that the death of Jesus might have been unforeseen when he declared that Jesus was “delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:22f).

If man could prevent God’s fulfillment of prophecies to raise Jesus to sit on David’s throne once, can he do it again in some time to come? How can we trust God if he lets man rule his will and purposes and defeat his promises?

Because the Jews were looking for a restoration of their earthly kingdom, Jesus did extensive teaching to impress them that his kingdom and rule would be spiritual. His subjects would enter the kingdom by a spiritual birth. He was crowned at the right hand of God after his atonement,

resurrection, and ascension and has sent the Holy Spirit to guide his spiritual people. In this universal kingdom, no nationality or race is regarded any more for we are all one in Christ. The Jew lost his favored status when God caused all nations to flow into his one, universal, spiritual kingdom under the reign of him who went to the cross for all. To those who would look forward to the restoration of fleshly Israel and the establishment of a fleshly, earthly kingdom, I would ask with Paul, “Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now ending (perfected, ASV) in the flesh?” (Gal. 3:3). Think of it: Christ, the universal king, on a localized earthly throne aided by fleshly administrators, regressing from the heavenly and spiritual to the earthly and fleshly!

The entire earthly kingdom concept would make Jesus’ great temptation meaningless and the cross unnecessary and outside of God’s original plan. If that had been Jesus’ purpose in coming, then the devil would have only been encouraging Jesus instead of tempting him in his encounters with him in the wilderness and in Gethsemane.

In making these strong statements about premillennial views, I am not saying that those who hold them deny that the cross was in God’s plan or deny that the atonement was necessary. But I am contending that they would be denying such if they were consistent. In this case, to say the least, their inconsistency is a blessing!

Finally, even though you may hold these beliefs which I think are erroneous, you are still my brother or sister in the Lord.

Chapter 32

The Rich Man and Lazarus

If I could sneak into this essay through the back door without being detected, I might try it because my interpretation of the account of the Rich Man and Lazarus could possibly be proven wrong. But you have already learned how foolhardy I am about such matters, so here I go!

This interpretation of the story of the rich man and Lazarus was suggested to me by Byron Bradfute, a local friend (of sorts!). He claims that it was an original idea of his; so I accept it as such for Brad is trustworthy (at times). If you disagree with this interpretation, give Brad the credit for it. If you think it is a brilliant revelation of truth, consider me as the one taking the rough stone which he found and polishing it to such a sparkle.

Brad began by asking the question that I have been asked many times: Is the account of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) a parable or a true story? He considers it to be a parable, and I agree that it is figurative — either a parable or an allegory. In thinking of it as a parable my previous thoughts were that the rich man and Lazarus were not real persons but that all other points of the story were to be taken at face value. But parables teach hidden lessons, and most parables emphasize only one point. An allegory is a sustained analogy, a prolonged metaphor which suppresses all mention of the principal subject as in the story that Nathan told David about the rich man taking the poor man's only ewe lamb. The subject was not mentioned in the allegory.

Thinking that we might have missed some less obvious meanings, I would invite you to explore some more with me. What are the veiled messages in this parable or the suppressed subject of this allegory? Are we to understand that angels carry away the bodies of the poor when they die but leave the rich dead to be buried? Is Jesus teaching that the redeemed dead actually go into Abraham's arms in physical bodies immediately after death, that the damned are cast into literal fire in their physical bodies the moment they die, and that the saved and the lost can see and communicate with each other? Is Abraham in charge of the unseen world and departed spirits? Does this give us the actual locations for those dubious diagrams about "Where Are The Dead?" Is Jesus teaching here that wealth is sinful and that poverty is a virtue?

In most of the parables, Jesus set forth some veiled truth about the coming kingdom. Some of those parables dealt with the forthcoming rejection of the Christ and his kingdom by the Jews and their forthcoming rejection by God as a consequence. Let us think of this parable in such a framework.

Jesus had much to say about the Jews losing their favored status with God. Early in his ministry, in commending the faith of the Gentile centurion, he addressed the Jews: "I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth" (Matt. 8:11f). Is this not a brief parallel of the account of the rich man and Lazarus?

In the parable of the vineyard Jesus warned, “He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons” (Matt. 21:33-41).

In another parable, because they spurned the king’s invitation to the wedding feast, the wedding hall was filled with others and “The king was angry, and sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city” (Matt. 22:1-14). The guests were not judged according to favored national or racial status but according to character depicted by the wedding garment. Because of their forthcoming rejection, Jesus pronounced woes against them prophetically declaring, “Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate” (Matt. 23).

The account under study is generally thought to be a lesson concerning the use of earthly wealth, and some of the context could support that approach. But the context also speaks of the good news of the kingdom (16:16).

The rich man may well portray the Jewish leaders and their nation. Being clothed in the purple of royalty and fine linen of the priesthood, they fared sumptuously on spiritual advantages. Paul wrote of this: “They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ” (Rom. 9:2-5). Accepting these blessings as though they deserved them, they became smug, exclusive, and nationalistic. They could argue among themselves as to which religious party among them was right without even considering that a Gentile might qualify for God’s favor.

Lazarus — whose name means “without help” — pictures the spiritually starving Gentile world that was ignored and disdained by the Jew. In his powerless state, he was laid, not near the table or the door, but outside the gate. Hear Paul concerning the condition of the Gentile: “Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands — remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ” (Eph. 2:11-13).

While the Jews were enjoying the “chosen” status “near” to God, the Gentiles were “far off.” In the company of dogs (idols), they had repulsive spiritual sores soothed only by the licking of their pagan beliefs. While they were starving, the smug Jews had little mission even to toss them spiritual crumbs. A few proselytes would find crumbs through which means they might be led to become “twice as much a child of hell as yourselves” (Matt. 23:15). But now they would be welcomed by Abraham as his children through faith and as the chosen of God in him, along with individual Jews who together would become the new spiritual Israel.

Even as the Jews trusted that they were children of Abraham and children of the kingdom, they had become children of disobedience, children of hell, and children of their father, the devil. The roles were reversed so that Lazarus was in Abraham’s arms and the rich man was rejected and “far off.” The Jewish nation with its earthly hopes was overthrown in 70 A.D. when Jerusalem was destroyed and the Jews were dispersed among the Gentiles. In the succeeding centuries, the

rich man has been calling for mercy from Lazarus as he has been scattered and persecuted among the nations. This allegory had an earthly and a spiritual meaning projecting into the centuries and into eternity.

This message was prophetic. Jesus was not describing the condition that existed at the moment for their full rejection of Jesus was yet to come. The rich man asked that one be sent back from the dead to induce belief. Jews asked for greater signs, but they had Moses and the prophets, the same testimonies that would cause the Gentiles to believe, to induce faith. Yet, to further accommodate them, Jesus would call another Lazarus back from the dead. Instead of their being convinced by that demonstration, they began to consider how to put Jesus to death (John 11). After they had killed Jesus and he was proven to be the Son of God by his resurrection, the Jews still continued their rejection.

No other messenger would be sent. Jesus was the last prophet. The great chasm remains. The rich man cannot cross over. This is the last scene. Many modern disciples would add another scene depicting the Jewish nation crossing that great gulf and being restored to favor as a nation. But the curtain falls!

Since beginning this essay, I have read of others who put forth a similar explanation going all the way back to Augustine and Gregory the Great. So I feel a bit less uneasy. Maybe Brad is smarter than I thought, his ancient mind enabling him to think like the ancients!

This approach to interpreting this parable does no violence to other teachings of the Scriptures and it does eliminate puzzling questions which we raised earlier.

Now let me entice you further into this uncertain course of interpretation. Let us look backward in our context. The Jews had been enriched by the mammon of earthly blessings along with the enrichment of spiritual advantage. While grasping the earthly promises, they proved themselves unfaithful in little. They were not trustworthy of the much greater spiritual treasures (Luke 16:10-13).

Then look back to the perplexing parable of the dishonest steward (v. 1-16). Having failed their stewardship and their loss of favor, they could still save themselves individually by dispensing the grace of God in forgiving sins through Christ like the Jewish apostles and evangelists did. This individual acceptance and proclamation of Christ would allow them to be forgiven and to be received into eternal habitations.

You could more easily swallow a whale than this interpretation? Well, some do have mouths larger than their minds! You are still my beloved brother or sister even when we disagree. That's what counts.

Chapter 33

My Hermeneutic

When I was a “ministerial student” in Abilene Christian College shortly before World War II, if anyone on campus had ever heard of hermeneutics, they kept it quiet! There was little sophistication then. Now, it is popular to speak about “our hermeneutic” — the method we use for establishing Scriptural authority for what we practice.

Whether you have heard of our hermeneutics or not, you surely have been taught that we determine scriptural authority for what we do by (1) direct command, (1) approved example, and (3) necessary inference. Most of us were bottle-fed on that formula.

That makes interpretation of the Scriptures easy, does it not? (Oops, we are not to interpret the Scriptures, we are cautioned, but just take them for what they say!) Just find the commands, which includes all imperative statements, instructions, exhortations, warnings, and advice. And find all the historical details, whether incidental or specified as examples, that are not given a negative connotation in the text to follow as precedents. Then read between the lines, as it were, to reach conclusions not expressed in the text but logically derived from stated facts, premises, or other supposed evidence.

Isn't that simple! Just follow that hermeneutic and we will all be united on the basis of truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth! You may even have to get help in order to misunderstand the Scriptures!

Wrestling with that sort of ideology, the sincerest of men have continued to debate and divide, especially in my lifetime. If demonstration is acceptable evidence, we have proved that such an approach to understanding will not work. Yet we hear continued insistence that we must follow that track, and we continue to fragment.

Let's face it: None of us is willing to follow those three rules consistently. We accept what seems to fit our understanding, and we reject or overlook teachings of the same classification that do not fit our mental picture. Let me point out just a few teachings to illustrate this.

COMMANDS: “Give to everyone who begs of you”; “Lend, expecting nothing in return”; “Judge not, condemn not” (Luke 6:30, 35, 37). “When you pray, say,” the Lord's Prayer (Lk. 11:2; Matt. 6:9). “Think not that I came to abolish the law”; “Do not swear at all”; “When you pray, go into your room and shut the door” (Matt. 5:17, 34; 6:6). “When you give a dinner or banquet, do not invite your friends, etc. When you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind...” (Luke 14:12f). “Earnestly desire...that you may prophesy” (1 Cor. 14:1). “Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord” (James 5:14). “If any one is hungry, let him eat at home” (1 Cor. 11:34). “Let him who is taught the word share all good things with him who teaches” (Gal. 6:6).

Is that enough, or must I go on? A complete list of the directives in the New Testament Scriptures would be staggering. Do you keep all those commands? Do you know of anyone who even tries to keep them all? Books and commentaries have been written to explain to us why we need not feel obligated to obey all these directives. So, what does that do for our simplistic hermeneutic?

EXAMPLES: After Jesus had washed his disciples' feet, he said, "I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you." He said also, "You ought to wash one another's feet." (John 13:14f). This is an example which Jesus commanded — doubly bound! Jesus gave the Lord's Prayer as an example and told his disciples to say those words when they prayed (Matt. 6:9; Luke 11:2). Have you been told not to use those words in prayer and that washing of feet in unnecessary?

We have the example of Jesus and his disciples participating in the Lord's Supper on a weekday. Have you been warned against following that example?

Paul gave "an example to imitate" to the Thessalonian disciples by working to pay his own way while serving among them (2 Thes. 3:7f). How many ministers and preachers bind that "approved example"?

Paul gave us an approved example of keeping rituals of the Law of Moses long after he became a disciple (Acts 21:17-26). Does that example establish Scriptural authority which we must obey?

In the only example of the appointing of elders, it was done by two evangelists accompanied by prayer and fasting (Acts 14:23). Are we not bound to follow this reasoning: (1) In the only approved example of the appointing of elders, the appointment was done by evangelists; (2) we must follow all approved examples to be saved; (3) therefore, elders must be appointed only by evangelists. Or, (1) They fasted and prayed when appointing elders in the only approved example; (2) we must follow all approved examples as authoritative; (3) therefore, we must fast and pray in the process of appointing elders.

If Scriptural authority is established by "approved example" (historical or incidental details), then we have a lot of revising to do in order to be consistent. But nothing in the Scriptures indicates that a historical or incidental occurrence sets a pattern that must be followed or limits us to that supposed pattern.

NECESSARY INFERENCE: If all the above is confusing to you, save a bit of bewilderment for the necessary inference hermeneutic. This involves our reasoning and logic. I don't know who established this method, but I suspect that we would have never needed it were it not for the perceived need to bind observance of the Lord's Supper every Sunday.

Our traditional illustration for that inference is "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." It is reasoned that this command implies that they were to keep every Sabbath day, that those at Troas met on the first day of the week to break bread, and that one must necessarily infer that they broke bread every first day of the week (Acts 20:7).

“Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy” does infer that they were to keep each Sabbath, for an implication is a meaning expressed indirectly. The thing implied here is that any time a person failed to keep the Sabbath holy, he would be violating the command. Other teachings in the Law about Sabbath-keeping would even remove it from the area of implication.

How universally must we interpret that rule of implication? Paul commanded, “Contribute to the needs of the saints” (Rom. 12:13). Using the same reasoning that we use concerning the Sabbath, does that not imply that we must contribute to the needs of every saint, for when we fail to help one, we have violated the command?

An inference cannot be considered as necessary unless its disregarded conclusion brings us in conflict with an expressed directive, and in that case the force is in the command rather than the inferred conclusion.

We do not deal with inferences consistently. Jesus instructed: “When you fast, do not look dismal...” (Matt. 6:16f). That clearly implies that we should fast, does it not? “Love your enemies” (Matt. 5:44) implies that we must have enemies. “Honor the king/emperor (1 Pet. 2:17) implies that we should live under a monarchy. Do we bind the inferences drawn from those instructions?

ACTS 20:7

There is no command, example, or inference that disciples are required to participate in the Communion once and only once each and every first day of the week. In using Acts 20:7 as our proof-text, we have assumed that the breaking of bread is the Communion, and an assumption kills the validity of any premise!

“On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them...” Can it possibly be inferred that Luke and Paul gathered with them each and every first day, or that the disciples of Troas gathered to break bread each and every first day? Does it imply that they had been doing so previously and that they continued to do so afterward? No such inference is suggested.

If their meeting was according to the Jewish reckoning of time, they met on Saturday night to participate. Would that be acceptable today? If their meeting was according to the Roman time, they met on Sunday night but did not participate until Monday morning after Paul’s midnight discourse. Would that be acceptable for us? The command, example, inference formula proves nothing relating to this text.

If Luke had indicated that this incident were recorded in order to emphasize some lesson, then we would be obligated to draw some inferences. In the absence of a stated purpose, let us ask why Luke reported it. It could be because this tells us of Paul’s greatest miracle — the raising of a man from the dead! But we have overlooked the obvious purpose in order to uphold an unwarranted contention.

You may be protesting mentally that I am overlooking the rules by which we determine which command, example, or inference is binding on us and which is not. These questions must be asked as we study: Who is speaking or writing? To whom is it addressed? What is the context of the message? In what period of history did it apply? Is it universal or limited in its application? What were the customs of the land at that time? What do other portions of the Scriptures say on the subject? Is the language to be understood literally or figuratively? What is the meaning of the words used?

That simplifies everything, doesn't it? Countless volumes have been written to explain all those things, and we continue to lack a common understanding and to justify unholy divisions. We simply have not come up with a consistent hermeneutic. The tendency is to reject others who do not follow our hermeneutic even though we do not follow it consistently ourselves.

Our Problem

Our problem of interpretation begins with a legal concept of God's revelation and requirements for us. We have been more concerned about pleasing God by rituals than in establishing a personal relationship with him. Legalism demands patternism for if there is law, there must be a pattern to follow in order to fulfil it. Then, when we fail to conform to the pattern, we must restore that pattern. So, our infamous formula of legalism, patternism, and restorationism has resulted from our approach to interpretation. These have always been divisive and will always be so. The legalistic formula of command, example, and inference has been bent and twisted to justify each diverse course taken by those who try to follow it.

As I begin an attempt to set forth my hermeneutic, let me state an indisputable fact: Scriptural interpretation is not an exact science! Whoa, there! That leaves us dangling and unsure without foundation and conviction! No, not really. Stay with me a while longer.

We are all searching for truth and trying to understand it. Can we know and understand all factual truth? That is both impossible and unnecessary. Even though we have heard sincere claims that all truth relating to our salvation is in the Bible and can be known and understood, only a self-deceived person would claim to be aware of all the facts and to comprehend their meaning.

The Bible contains facts which reveal truth. Truth is more than facts; it is a person, a Divinity, who is the prime and living Reality. Jesus declared, "And this is eternal life, that they should know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3). Although we cannot comprehend God without comprehension of some facts, the knowledge of information about him is not what it means to know God. If we must know all information about God in order to have eternal life, no one could receive it. The knowing of God is the experiencing of a relationship with him. That knowledge of communion with God can be enjoyed by relatively ignorant people. This revelation of God is not law nor is the personal fellowship with him attained through law.

Because all must know God in order to have eternal life, God has revealed himself to man even "beyond the sacred page."

1. God has revealed himself through nature. Especially, in Job, Psalms 19, and Romans 1-2, we see undeniable evidence that the Creator made himself known with his power and divinity through what he created. Those peoples who had no written, factual revelation of God could have a saving communion with God without the written revelation.

2. God has revealed himself in history in his dealing with man. The Bible is a record of God's dealing with man. It is true, but it is not that Truth which gives eternal life. It identifies him so that we can know him in an experiential relationship. This inspired revelation tells how that in different times God gave specific laws and regulations. These were not the liberating truth but were efforts to keep man in a spiritual relationship with God. God also made the Christ known in history.

3. God revealed himself in the incarnation. Jesus said, "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). The New Testament writings are not that truth but they reveal him who said, "I am the Truth!" To know the Son is to know the Father for they are one. To those who revered the Scriptures as a compilation of facts and laws, Jesus chided, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me; yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (John 5:39f). They knew the facts of the revelation but did not know God, the Truth! It was the fellowship with God through belief in Jesus that brought life rather than the thorough knowledge of facts and the flawless keeping of laws. Why has it been so difficult for us to grasp that? We, like they, still search the Scriptures as a book of law and information in an effort to gain life through our own understanding of facts and our keeping of a legal code with its rituals.

Revealed Through His Spirit

4. God has revealed himself to man, in man, and through man through his Spirit. Not only has he given us written revelation through the Spirit, he has seen fit to live in us individually as a temple. Are we temples of an inert, impotent Spirit, or of one who guides, supports, enables, and provides?

"To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good," Paul assures us. Then he adds, "All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills" (1 Cor. 12:7, 11). Each of us is a part of the body with a particular function, gift, or manifestation of the Spirit. In this sense, God reveals himself to each of us individually.

In the capacities that God assigns us, "our sufficiency is from God, who has qualified us to be ministers of a new covenant, not in a written code but in the Spirit; for the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6). After further discussion, Paul adds, "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:17f). This has to do with the way we are to know God, "For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

Although we might be inclined to think that God put his laws in a legal code on the pages of the New Testament writings, he has put them in our hearts instead. Even those who had no written revelation of God could still have the law written on their hearts, according to Romans 1-2. All men have known to love God and man.

With the coming of Jesus another element was added to God's requirement: "And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who keep his commandments abide in him, and he in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit which he has given us" (1 John 3:23f). "When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God..." (Rom. 8:15f).

The written revelation gives us grounds for our belief and love, and it guides and encourages the expression of it through teachings, commands, exhortations, and warnings. But the comprehensive law of God has been given to us individually by the Spirit, "because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5).

Such an infusion of the law of love was prophesied: "This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord; I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach every one his fellow or every one his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for all shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest" (Heb. 8:10f). Through faith and love the disciple knows him — has eternal life — and has understanding of his law — his principle of action. This must be what John had in mind when he wrote, "But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all know," and "I write this to you about those who would deceive you; but the anointing which you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you; as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie, just as it has taught you, abide in him" (1 John 2:20, 26f). For the Ephesian disciples Paul prayed "that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of Glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened..." (Eph. 1:17). That goes "beyond the sacred page"!

Concerning any who would boast of having knowledge of proper information, Paul wrote, "If any one imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if one loves God, one is known by him" (1 Cor. 8:2f). To be recognized by God, love is the vital factor which God sees rather than our being able to interpret what we consider as a code of rules and laws which we might suppose to be the law of Christ.

A Code Of Law

A code of laws cannot be kept perfectly because of our fleshly nature. Law brings death because it requires living perfectly in the flesh, but the Spirit gives life. Paul explains to those who walk by the Spirit instead of by law which brings death, "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace." Then he continues, "But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if the

Spirit of God really dwells in you. Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.” That indwelling Spirit leads us, “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God...the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God...” (See Rom. 8:1-17). Being led by the Spirit, we know God in the relationship of sons who have eternal life.

We do not need a hermeneutic which interprets law for we are not serving such a system which could only bring death. The effort to interpret the will of God for us by command, example, and necessary inference is an effort to interpret what is perceived as a code of law; the results are legalism, patternism, and restorationism.

My Hermeneutic

What, then, is my hermeneutic? First, we must begin with a hunger and thirst after righteousness which will be filled, according to Jesus’ promise. Confessing our lack of understanding, we will ask God for wisdom which he has promised to give. Surely, our hunger will cause us to learn God’s written revelation to the extent of their availability, our literacy, and our intelligence, even though different people in different circumstances have been very limited in these. In this sincere attitude the heart and life will be opened for the direction and working of the Spirit.

The Spirit apportions to each person according to his need and gives gifts for various workings. Since we are all different and God knows our difference in understanding and ability, he apportions to each one individually as he wills. His direction to you may not be the same as that given to me, for we are not all identical. I am convinced that Paul was also including us when he wrote, “So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit.” Then Paul emphasizes the individuality of the gift and direction to each person, “The spiritual man judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?’ But we have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:11-16).

This is our provision from heaven to perform the ministry which God gives us in the manner that he directs us individually without being judged by anyone and without judging others who follow different courses into which the Spirit has directed them.

This hermeneutic takes us out of the realm of evaluation of legal requirements and puts us into an individual living communion, fellowship, relationship, and knowledge of God. And that is the knowledge of God that gives eternal life.

This hermeneutic is the accepting of the grace of God and the attuning of our lives to him in response to his grace of justification and endowment of the Spirit in us. It is the individual freedom to interpret his will and guidance and to express ourselves in full-life devotion without trying to gain merit by keeping a system of laws or following forms correctly. It is being free to judge ourselves without judging others. It is the freedom to love God and man without reservation. It is to know God and to be known by him — to have eternal life!

Chapter 34

Is Immersion Proved By Example?

In my youth I learned how simply the baptism of the Ethiopian nobleman served as a pattern to prove immersion. As I used that example through the years, I thought that anyone who rejected the impact of that precedent just did not respect Bible authority. I learned our hermeneutic of “the authority of approved example” before I ever knew what a hermeneutic was.

Now that I border on senility, I ask: Is immersion proved by the example of the baptism of the eunuch? The answer: No!

As a youth I picked up and used extensively the old sermon about baptism — that it required water, much water, going to the water, going down into the water, and coming up out of the water. I could illustrate that beautifully by the account of the baptism of the eunuch.

Now, let’s look at Philip and the eunuch: “...they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water...”(Acts 8:38f). After they went down into the water, Philip baptized the eunuch. Then they came up out of the water. The baptizing took place after they went into the water and before they came out of it. The going in and coming out were not a part of the baptism. Whatever baptism is, it was performed between the going into and coming out of the water. Besides, Philip went into and came out of the water, and he was neither baptized nor partially baptized.

We go to that passage with a mental picture of immersion to substantiate. If we did not know what baptism was already, what would the example prove? Suppose, for instance, that baptism meant to wash his wounds. Would it still be an example of immersion as he washed his wounds?

I am not trying to convince you that pouring or sprinkling water is a proper mode of baptism. I do not understand why anyone would practice anything except immersion. But I am questioning our hermeneutic of trying to bind historical details as patterns.

Immersion is authorized by the word *baptizo* which means to immerse, not by some supposed example. Surely, the eunuch was immersed, but the “example” does not prove it!

Well, even though this is not exactly an example, baptism is described as a burial in water in Romans 6:3-4, isn’t it? Not really! That text reads: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death...” That passage does not picture baptism in water. In baptism we are buried with Christ in his tomb — not Jesus buried with us in water. Whatever baptism is, in it we are symbolically buried with Jesus in his tomb nineteen centuries ago. Because we know the meaning of *baptizo*, however, we know Paul speaks of immersion here, but a burial in water is not indicated in the language of this reference.

Now, let’s look at another example of baptism. In describing the falling of the Holy Spirit on the apostles on Pentecost, three times that baptism is referred to as a pouring out of the Holy Spirit

(Acts 2:16-19, 33). In fact, it was “distributed and resting on each one of them” (2:3). Its falling in such a dispersed manner looks more like sprinkling (aspersion) than immersion! In other references, the falling, pouring out, and receiving of the Holy Spirit are all related to the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44-47; 11:15f; Titus 3:5f). The giving of the Spirit which enabled disciples to know the truth was called an anointing rather than a burial (1 John 2:20, 26; John 14:26).

Following our hermeneutic of approve example, are we not authorized to define baptism as pouring, aspersion, or anointing? We have tried to evade this point by explaining that the baptism of the Spirit was an overwhelming or submerging of the person by the Holy Spirit. But the Scriptures still say that the Spirit was poured out and fell on them in a distributed manner. Having made this point, I will not pursue any study of the meaning of these words further here.

Again, I have no desire to convince you that immersion should be abandoned, but I am saying that our “approved example” hermeneutic is ineffective.

In the first instance we try to make an example where there is none and in the second we try to explain away the impact of an example. And this is only one of our many inconsistencies in trying to follow precedents as though they were laws. A historical account may reveal an acceptable method for doing a thing but it does not necessarily indicate the only acceptable method.

As I so often sought to bind immersion by the force of example of the Ethiopian’s baptism, I wondered why the whole world could not see it as I did. Now I am beginning to see why many of my listeners could detect the inadequacy of my premise.

Chapter 35

Who Gets The Credit?

With a little persuasion some people can be induced to tell you about their health problems. You have heard the story so often that you can tell it yourself with all its embellishments. In short, it goes like this: “I did not get to the hospital a minute too soon. I was scared and praying and about to die. Fortunately, one of the best doctors in the state was there and started working on me. He knew the latest techniques and also used a newly developed drug which worked wonders. Had I not been so lucky to catch that doctor there at that time, I would not be around to tell about it now.”

This illustrates a strange mentality that is seen among us too commonly. We are people who supposedly turn our lives over to God and pray to him to care for our needs. Then when a crisis is over, we give the credit to ourselves or other persons, leaving God out of it.

The incredible thing about this outlook is that when others claim that God has intervened in their lives, we deny that he did. We pray for the sick, but then our preacher may publicly challenge anyone to prove that God heals people in answer to prayer. By denying that he will intervene, we are giving the credit for healing to nature, ourselves, or Satan, but not to God!

How can disciples develop the mentality that will more readily give credit for good things to Satan than to God? When someone tells how the Spirit worked in his life giving some special direction or solving some specific problem, do you deny that the Spirit did it? Why are you so reluctant to give praise to God for it? Is it simply because you disagree with that person on some doctrinal issues?

People have been driven from our fellowship because they have claimed to speak in an ecstatic language enabled by the Spirit. Because he has not given me such an experience, am I to conclude that he gives it to no one? Am I such a judge of what God will or will not do that I can boldly attribute that which I do not understand to the devil? Supposing the tongue-speaker is self-deluded, is his giving God credit for something like that which draws him closer to God going to damn his soul? If it proves to be that the Spirit actually worked in the person and I give the credit to Satan, that does not put me in a very enviable position — a believer giving Satan credit for God’s work!

If a person gives God praise for special subjective experiences which made him more conscious of God in his life, why should other disciples become upset? Lack of awareness of God’s constant presence and his indwelling Spirit can cause one to deny that realization in others.

Many times when I have been writing, some point has come to mind clearly that I had never thought of before and that I was not trying to discover. A number of people have told me that my writings were inspired. Wait a minute; I am not even hinting that I have delivered any new oracle from God. I don’t know whether the Spirit worked in me or not. I am saying that the Spirit might want my readers to see some point that neither I nor they have understood and that he may be guiding me into that previously revealed truth. Does that sound too presumptuous on

my part? Well, which is the more acceptable — to thank God for the enlightenment of his Spirit within me, or to say that I thought of it all by myself without any help from the Spirit, thank you? Who gets the credit?

Some believe that God may let something bad happen to children in order to discipline the parents, or that he might bring disease to the one who drinks to correct him. It has been proposed that AIDS has been sent by God in order to punish our national sexual promiscuity and highly flaunted homosexuality. My first reaction has always been that God does not make the innocent suffer while punishing the wicked. But is that right? Bible history is filled with examples of the judgments against a particular sin bringing suffering upon the innocent. I am saying that I do not know the answer, but if I give credit for these bad things to Satan or to nature when God is actually allowing and using them to discipline his people, then I am working against the will of the Lord. My second-guessing of God's intentions can put me in a bad spot. Evil things have their origin in Satan, but God can use them to accomplish his purposes.

When we speak of good fortune, luck, chance, and circumstantial happenings, we reveal our contentment with leaving God out of our thinking. We are unwilling to admit that he still notices the sparrow's fall or a nation's fall. It is nothing short of the work of God that communism could be brought to collapse without military force. Why give the credit to Gorbachev and his glasnost? Gorbachev is being used but is not the cause of it.

Why doesn't God work wonders in your life or in that of your congregation? Perhaps you are quenching the spirit. When Jesus went back to his own hometown, "He could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands upon a few sick people and healed them. And he marveled because of their unbelief" (Mark 6:5f). They could and did limit the powers of Jesus! So can we.

When Jesus was healing people, some attributed the cures to Satanic powers (Matt. 12:22-32). This brought Jesus' warning about blasphemy against the Spirit. I am in awe to think how many of us have quenched the Spirit and blasphemed against him by claiming to know the mind of God and by giving credit for his works to "natural causes," men, and Satan instead of praising him.

Even the pagans with no revelation of God except nature were expected to honor God and give thanks to him (Rom. 1:18f). If they were to attribute the inexplicable things to God, how can enlightened disciples become so wise as to deny divine intervention? There is a loud and frightening message here!

When Joseph was sold by his brothers, served as a slave, and suffered imprisonment, he probably did not praise God for all that, but he did continue to consider God in his conduct. Later he could see that God used the bad and the good to accomplish his plan, and he gave God the glory for it (Gen. 45:5f; 50:20f).

Surely, sin and death came through the power of Satan, but Paul could see God's plan work through Christ to bring him glory and praise, and he shouts, "Thanks be to God who gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!" (1 Cor. 15:57).

After reviewing God's dealing with mankind through history, Paul fans away the chaff of human wisdom in his comprehensive exclamation of praise: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable are his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?' 'Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever. Amen." (Rom. 11:33-36). His ways are beyond our limited perception. Let us join in praise for his actions which are too intricate for our comprehension.

We, with our shrunken faith and such limited knowledge, need desperately to open our hearts to God's power in us "...that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man...that you may be filled with all the fulness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen." (Eph. 3:14-21). Believing that he does so work in us, let us be quick to give him the credit and praise.

Chapter 36

HOOK'S POINTS

Through the years in which I published a church bulletin, I headed a more personal column as "Hook's Points." That catch-all page was a potpourri of one-liners, abbreviated observations, expressions of my feelings, impertinent questions, and many points not to be taken too seriously — none of which deserved a separate heading.

This will be another extension of that column; however, I shall only include items long enough to need a heading of their own but too brief to be included as a chapter in this book.

A Modern Name

Simon was his original name. He was referred to as Simon Bar-Jona. Bar-Jona(s) meant son of John, or John's son. Jesus changed his name to Cephas, or Peter, which means rock. So, really, we can say that the great apostle's name was Rock Johnson!

Accelerating Change

Because we have thought that we already had all the right answers, we have felt little need for change. But there have always been disciples among us who thought for themselves. Many of those either dropped out in discouragement, moved on to more accepting fellowships, or struggled along trying not to rock the boat with their different ideas.

It is more encouraging now. This old gray head is actually optimistic! Many are recognizing the futility of efforts toward legal righteousness and they are rejoicing in the liberating and unifying grace of Christ. They are becoming free of the oppressive, guilt inducing system that we developed thinking that it was the true way of the Lord. Our exclusive, sectarian spirit is being replaced by wider acceptance which promotes unity.

In response to my writings, I have heard from thousands of these people. The Spirit is working change. The Lord is still opening hearts. Because of their isolation, many of these disciples have not been aware that they are really a part of a multitude who seek a personal Savior, a relevant message, and a supportive fellowship.

Leadership in this much needed change has not come from our preachers primarily nor from our schools nor from our preacher training schools. These cannot get ahead of the system that supports them. Leadership has not come from our elders as we would wish because they must protect the system that they oversee. This is more of a grassroots movement, and it is growing so strong that the system cannot ignore it. The roof is crumbling down on its supporters.

An observation: Many of our people began to look for grace when there was a marriage failure in the family. They could find no mercy in our legal system. Through this back door, they entered into refreshing grace.

Believing In Faith

We are saved by faith but not by the merit of faith. Jesus is the one who saves. It is not of our works. Often people who disdain the idea of works salvation really substitute faith for works. By stressing the intensity of faith that is thought to qualify one for grace, they are actually substituting meritorious faith for meritorious works! One of these does not make a person feel more secure than the other. Both are based upon human achievement.

Faith fills the gap between the mortal and the divine. Although we are now separated by sin, we are of divine spirit. Faith is the connection through which divinity can continue to flow into us. It is like a communications satellite which allows exchange with other lands. The messages exchanged are not rewards of the satellite but are enabled by it.

Jesus' First Sermon

So far as the record indicates, Jesus' first sermon was delivered in the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth (Luke 4:16-30). He announced his mission in the words of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

Whether you wish to preach or to serve in other ways, there is an outline for your life ministry. I must confess that I did not follow that outline very closely. That kind of people seldom came to our building to hear my doctrinal discourses.

A News Report

Matthew gives a calm and factual account of the feeding of 5,000 men plus women and children (Matt. 14:13-21). The news media today deals very cynically with anything that pertains to the Christian religion. If the news reporters of Jesus' time felt the same disaffection for religion as their modern counterparts, their account in the Galilee Gazette or Eyewitness News might have run like this:

"Because the excitable peasants of Galilee had heard claims that the young zealot from Nazareth performed healing miracles, they blindly flocked to him. Some claimed that more than 5,000 persons crowded around him but that was an evident exaggeration by Jesus' disciples.

"After the people ate their evening meal, rumors were circulated that the Nazarene had multiplied five loaves and two fish to feed them all. It is not known where the food came from, but it is admitted that some food was brought to the place. Where else did those twelve baskets come from in which they claimed to gather the left-overs?

"Jesus had the people to enter Ahab's pasture land and to sit on the grass with all the ants and chiggers. Ahab asked the authorities to run them off his grazing land but the officials thought that might incite a riot. Ahab says that he may sue for damages.

“The lack of any restroom facilities made for a shameful situation and left a stench on Ahab’s choice property.

“Some reported that Jesus was teaching, but in a crowd of that size with its noisy children, it would have been impossible to see or hear. One reporter did hear him repeat some platitudes and make some wild claim about being from God.

“Some unnamed officials have expressed relief that Jesus has left their area so that the disillusioned peasants have gone back to their jobs.”

A Dull Lesson

Midweek meetings are not usually very lively. This particular midweek class was the dullest of the dull.

As a visitor in this congregation, I listened to the preacher, whose blood sugar must have been low that night, as he covered Romans 16:1-16. There is a bunch of unidentifiable characters with hard-to-pronounce names whom you can say little about. The class sat in silence as the preacher struggled with suggestions and conjectures from the commentaries. Because I had been in the same situation many times, I could sympathize with the preacher.

Many years later, as I was teaching Acts in a class, I made a connection which made that chapter exciting. Paul had been imprisoned in Judea and separated from his coworkers and friends by time and distance. He had worked with different ones of them in various places. Those friends had gone to Rome, were his prayer partners, and were eager to hear from him. Little mail came through, but his letter comes to them. He remembers them and calls them by name! He plans to come to Rome where there will be a reunion.

After his imprisonment which stretched into years, Paul was sent to Rome. It was a torturous voyage interrupted by a hazardous storm and shipwreck which delayed them three months.

The journey resumes toward Rome. Word reaches Rome that Paul is coming — as a prisoner! We will go to meet him! “And the brethren there, when they heard of us, came as far as the Forum of Appius (43 miles) and Three Taverns (33 miles) to meet us” (Acts 28:15). Picture this. Many miles from Rome — there were those people with the hard-to-pronounce names who were so dear to Paul: Epaenetus, Andronicus, Urbanus, Stachys, Apelles, Aristobulus, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Asyncritus, Phlegon, and who knows how many more! The whole church! Surely, the beloved Prisca and Aquila were there! Plenty of hugging and tears! They had walked, ridden on horses, and come by chariot to welcome the discouraged prisoner. How do we know he was discouraged? “On seeing them Paul thanked God and took courage” (28:16).

A dull lesson? No more!

Gamaliel's Advice

If I were as astute as Gamaliel was, I would be too wise to question his judgments. But this denser mind is brash enough to challenge his applauded advice.

The Jewish council wanted to kill the apostles whom they had arrested (Acts 5:33-39). Gamaliel, a respected teacher of the law, cooled the members with advice to “keep away from these men and let them alone; for if this plan or this undertaking is of men, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!”

That cool-headed wisdom has been praised generally. But is a non-intervention policy wise in meeting the issues around us? Are we to leave problems alone to test by time whether they are of God or man by their success or failure? Is it true that all the unholy undertakings of men fail? Was it best not to oppose Mohammed, Hitler, and Stalin? And what about fighting the liquor industry, and the drug traffic, or the invading army? To say that God will take care of evil men in the judgment does not take care of the present. And that is not what Gamaliel had in mind.

Because an evil continues unabated does not mean that it is the work or will of God. We can hardly accept that the death of masses by starvation, disease, or extermination or that people dying in sin is the work or will of God. When we work to prevent or alleviate these things, we are not opposing God. Who will advise a neutral policy like Gamaliel proposed?

For disciples to explain some tragedy by shrugging, “It was just the will of God,” seems very inadequate to me.

I know that some of my questions lead off in the direction of skepticism. Should we do what God could do but does not do? How responsible am I for feeding the starving in Ethiopia or Cambodia? God knows that they are starving and he could give them rain and crops, or even send manna. Must innocent people suffer due to my lack of concern or my non-involvement like Gamaliel advised? I help some, but how much does God expect of me? Should I sell my second car or give up other luxuries in order to intervene?

Maybe we need another Gamaliel to give us the answers.

Lifting Holy Hands

With little notice we usually pass over Paul's words: “I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands...” (1 Tim. 2:8). Is the uplifting of hands in prayer a required ritual of acceptable worship?

The concept of raising hands to God accommodates man's thought that God is localized somewhere in the sky. Such accommodative language is common in the scriptures.

What is the purpose and meaning of lifting up holy hands? Is there some context that can help us to understand?

Paul seems to be alluding to the heave offering and votive offerings required of the Jews (Deut. 12:6, 11, 17; Num. 15:19). A votive offering is sacrificed or performed in fulfillment of a vow or in gratitude or devotion. It expresses a vow, a wish, or a desire.

Holy hands were those of the priest who was consecrated to make such offerings. He was dedicated exclusively (Deut. 18). Now, we are priests individually, consecrated that we may offer sacrifices lifted toward God with holy hands. Our offerings are expressions of thanksgiving, devotion, vows, and prayers.

The uplifted hands are not empty. They present the heave offering. In context, Paul urges women to beautify themselves, not with finery, “but by good deeds, as befits women who profess religion.” These are hands that have comforted the sick and aged, have lifted the downtrodden, have fed the hungry, and have written checks to alleviate human need. Such things are our heave offerings, our “thank yous” to the Lord.

To say that the holy hands must not be empty is not to indicate that prayers are answered in reward to quota performance. It means that the prayers rise from hearts which demonstrate gratitude and devotion. It is the worship of the heart that is raised rather than the literal hands. Prayer is accompanied by the offering of a dedicated life.

If you wish to extend your hands upward while praying or praising, that is acceptable unless you do it out of confidence in a ritual or to impress others. If you raise your hands when praying with others but not in private prayer, it may be proper to question whether it is a street corner gesture to be seen of others.

When your life is presented to God in total dedication, your “thank you” offerings are your uplifted hands.

Passing The Curse

If you could be relieved of a disease or problem by passing it on to someone else, would it be proper for you to do it? If it would be sinful for you to use something that you own, would you be right in selling it to someone else?

When Jesus was being anointed with the very expensive ointment, the disciples became indignant. It was a sinful waste! They proposed that the ointment might have been sold for a large sum and given to the poor (Matt.26:6-9). They were willing to sell the ointment, passing the curse on to the purchaser!

Allergies

Who isn't allergic to something? Allergies are annoying but usually they are not life-threatening. What causes one to wheeze and sneeze and snort and scratch may not bother the next person. For that reason a person should not try to forbid everything that bothers him.

We have spiritual allergies also. What makes one person very uncomfortable may be enjoyed in good conscience by other persons. We have different scruples, opinions, hang-ups, conditioning, and peeves. These should not be life-threatening. But we hear a lot of grumbling and hollering and raving and condemning by people who want to outlaw everything that bothers them. That is bigoted and self-centered.

We cannot readily cure all of our allergies, but we can keep ourselves non-involved with the things that bother us while letting others take care of their own situations. We should not become allergic to the fact that others do not suffer from our own allergies!

I can solve my difficulty with cedar pollen by moving to an area where there are no cedars. My irritation caused by citric acid does not bother me if I eat no citrus fruits. I can remedy my allergy to perfumes by staying away from women!

Concentration on one's irritations can almost drive a person out of his mind. If my wife were drowning in the river, however, I would forget about the itchy welts caused by mosquitoes and the threat of the poison ivy along the river bank. A chaplain of a cancer hospital remarked to me that people in that hospital are not concerned with doctrinal differences. What we may need is more important things to demand our attention.

The Malignancy

She was young, beautiful, energetic, charming, and loving. Disturbing symptoms developed. Diagnosis revealed internal cancer. At first there was denial. The doctors demanded chemotherapy, not as a cure, but to arrest the malignancy. That was a severe treatment which erased the beauty from her face, robbed her energy, and diminished her charm. Even with remission of the disease, she can never be quite the same.

The church of my heritage has had many admirable qualities. Disturbing symptoms became evident. The deep inward problem was seen to be a sectarian spirit. There is still much denial of that malignancy. A painful treatment is necessary to arrest it. It is painful to tear off our facade of united beauty while we are divided. There will be loss of face when we renounce our exclusive stance. There will be loss of our identity with its name of distinction when we accept all the saved. We must sacrifice patternism and restorationism, and thus our reason for being a separate body of disciples. Even if we can arrest this sectarian spirit and eliminate the legalism which produces it, the church of my heritage will never be quite the same.

Free From Church

Under this shocking heading, I want to challenge more concepts that have become sacred by our traditions.

Because Jesus died to purchase the church, I must not speak disrespectfully of it. Yet I must seek to correct its misdirections and warn of what threatens it. It is my family which I want to continue to be proud of.

All of the saved are in the one, universal congregation of God, but these saved ones have become segmented and sectarian in refusing fellowship with others whom the Lord has added. These groups have developed into separate systems with denominating names.

Those various systems have become institutionalized. When we speak of the church, most of us think of these systems. It is in that context that I want you to be free from church. I want you to be liberated from all of these authoritarian, institutionalized, systematized, organized, crystallized, and formalized concepts of the church.

There is a great movement out of those organizations. Religion is being taken from the church and recovered by the people. Church systems do not have religion; individuals do.

Change of historic institutions is slow and difficult, however, like changing the course of a ship with a paddle. There are too many vested interests that work against change. There is peer pressure to be like the rest of the sheep. There is fear and discomfort in accepting something new or different. And, not the least, reformers are not paid to reform.

Being free from church in this sense, the saved ones may lead holy lives using the gifts that God bestows upon them in the private ministry that God gives to each. That is people religion — the body of Christ in action, free from our restricting systems.

Outdated

Many things that we utilized a few years ago have gone the way of the manual typewriter, the inner tube, and the wooden chalk box. While someone may lament those things as a loss, our forsaken practices simply became impractical and were replaced by things that serve our needs better.

Through a great part of this century, the “gospel meeting” was considered to be an essential. It lasted from ten days to three weeks with morning and evening services. We got the most popular preacher available to do the honors. Most of our baptisms took place then. No more.

Those meetings were partially replaced by campaigns where the churches in a larger city would rent a municipal auditorium, engage the most dynamic preacher available, and try to make a big splash in the city. These were never very effective and have about faded away.

In my younger years, one of the big things was for members of a congregation to visit the neighboring church when it was having its big meeting. Too much church going!

How long has it been since your church had a singing school? Once they served a good purpose, but now that our public schools teach music to our children, there is little need for those singing schools — always with shaped notes.

In my youth, any congregation had to have a young people’s meeting to show that it was alive. With meetings an hour before the evening services, these served a generation before the youth director was born or invented.

As I was growing up, it was common for families to have other families to eat Sunday dinner (lunch) with them. The kids had to wait while a table or two of adults ate their meal. The preacher was always invited to a meal.

Covered dish meals in fellowship came into vogue but are already losing ground. Too much trouble to cook. The cafeteria is more convenient.

As I was growing up, every man in the congregation was addressed as “Brother” and every woman as “Sister.” Only familiar friends were called by the first name. I was glad to help neutralize that tradition.

I do not grieve the loss of the hour-long sermon! In uncomfortable seating in buildings too hot or too cold people would endure sermons from forty-five minutes to an hour and a half long. Scripture references were quoted by the dozen. A preacher would have been embarrassed to read his references.

These things changed because they failed to meet the needs of succeeding generations. Change is very necessary if we are going to meet the needs of people. We foul out when we accept a traditional practice as permanent. It becomes a ritual to be performed by which a person can be judged to be righteous. If we allow practical methods for one generation to become bound, we should not wonder at the loss of interest by the new generation.

Two Signatures

There is some kind of logic which says that if you are going to appoint the fox to guard the hen house, you should appoint another fox to protect the flock from the first one. At least, that is implied when we require that any check written by the treasurer of the congregation must be co-signed by another designated person.

If you cannot trust the brother, why appoint him to be the treasurer? If you cannot trust one brother, can you trust two? Perhaps the secret is to appoint as co-signers two men who don't get along together too well so they will keep a critical eye on one another!

Each member of the congregation has a right to know the detailed expenditures of the group. Even though there is no scriptural law that demands such, the law of common sense dictates it. Regular detailed financial statements reveal the integrity of the treasurer and the elders in the use of the money. The co-signer is unnecessary.

In too many instances, all the elders in a church have proven to be foxes. Even though they may give financial statements, they conceal questionable transactions under general headings or deliberately give inaccurate information. Such deceit has allowed great discrepancies and misuse of funds without the knowledge of the members.

If elders and treasurers are honest, they will want to account for each and every disbursement in such a manner that there can be no reason to question their integrity. Even though the money

may be handled with true honesty, failure to keep open records gives needless grounds for suspicion.

Chapter 37

Heresy

After reading my first book, according to the report of a friend, one woman declared it to be heresy — “pure heresy!” She is not alone in her conviction. If the book is heresy, then the author is a heretic.

If heresy is the teaching of error, then all who teach are in the same heretical boat, for none of us can boast of being free from all error.

If that lady accepts the current dictionary definition of heresy as adherence to a religious opinion contrary to church dogma, then she is right in her contention, for my writings challenge many cherished dogmas of the Church of Christ. Then she would also have to brand Jesus as the chief of heretics by that definition, for he certainly challenged the dogmas of the Jewish religion. If, however, she accepts the meaning of the word as it is used in the New Testament writing, she may find me not guilty and may discover that she is more heretical than I.

The root word *haireisis* denotes “a choosing, choice; then, that which is chosen, and hence, an opinion, especially a self-willed opinion, which is substituted for submission to the power of truth, and leads to division and the formation of sects; such erroneous opinions are frequently the outcome of personal preference or the prospect of advantage” (W. E. Vine, Dictionary of New Testament Words).

The emphasis in that definition is not on a person teaching some error but on the leading of others into a division or sectarian group. Teachings are not heretical; people are. Heresy is not erroneous teaching but it is the soliciting of followers in building or maintaining a party. A person may be heretical while teaching no error by creating a faction for his own advantage.

As the word is translated in the King James Version, “A man that is a heretic, after the first and second admonition, reject” (Titus 3:10), it is easy to apply a wrong definition to the word. In other versions like the Revised Standard Version, the true meaning is clearly evident: “As for a man who is factious, after admonishing him once or twice, have nothing more to do with him.” The factious (or heretical) person leads in developing parties among disciples so that they reject other disciples. The heretical, party spirit is a divisive, factious spirit.

Let it be noted in passing that when you reject someone as a heretic or factious person, you put yourself under obligation to admonish that person first lest you become self-condemned!

Now, let us consider whether I am heretical, leading people to reject other disciples to form separate parties. I hope that you will interpret this as no personal defense but as an effort to determine who is guilty of being divisive among God’s people. The culprit may not be whom you have suspected.

The major aim of my writing has been to free us of our bondage to a legal system which demands conformity. The efforts to bring all disciples together through conformity have forced

many divisions among us. The divisions have been caused by leaders who seek doctrinal unity rather than a unity of all because we are in Christ. The Spirit creates the unity by baptizing us into one body, not by bringing about unity of convictions on all points. Differing convictions and practices concerning circumcision, the eating of meats, or the observing of days were no disruption of unity. Different beliefs and practices relating to present-day debatable issues should not be disruptive of our unity. We are to accept and respect each other in spite of our lack of conformity.

Briefly stated, that is what I have been promoting. Have I led any disciples to reject others in Christ? Have I promoted division? I have been accused of dividing churches, but can one honestly bring such an accusation? I have led no group to form a new congregation, nor have I encouraged others to do so. I remain in the congregation which I served for ten years. I reject no one in it even though some of them strongly resist my message. The elders do not call upon me to participate in the program of the church, even to lead a prayer. All of their reaction is because I say that we should cease judging and condemning God's people and that we should accept all who are in Christ as beloved brothers and sisters. How can I be the cause of division when I have never advocated rejecting others, when I have pled for unity in spite of our differences, and when I have continued to accept, meet with, worship with, and serve with all disciples? My only "heresy" is in promoting and practicing unity with all who are in Christ!

Have not churches divided because of my books? Certain members of some congregations have used my books for discussion and Bible study and have been influenced to accept all of God's children. That became unacceptable to others who zealously rejected them for their spirit of unity! So, factious wedges have been driven by those demanding conformity; thus, divisions were forced — not because the accepting ones rejected other members of the body, but because those with the heretical spirit refused to have fellowship with them. In such a case, who divided the congregation? Who led in the forming and protecting of a party? Who became sectarian in refusing fellowship with other disciples? Who was binding their dogma on others and soliciting adherents to it?

In some instances, an accepting group has felt the harsh oppression of an authoritarian system so severely that they have been driven to start a new congregation. Any group may rightly form a new congregation as long as they do not have a rejecting, divisive spirit. If, however, they no longer consider those in their former congregation as brothers and sisters in Christ, they have a factious, sectarian spirit. But usually it is the other way around: those who leave still want the fellowship of the ones they are leaving and they cherish them as fellow disciples, while those left behind withdraw fellowship from the ones leaving, or at least blame them for dividing the church. Division is not in meeting in separate groups. Division occurs when people reject each other even though they may meet in the same assembly each week. Unity does not consist of meeting in the same assemblies. Again, in such a case as we have depicted, who is guilty of heresy?

In Romans 14, Paul gives an emphatic lesson which we have been slow to heed. The eating of meats or vegetables was immaterial to their faith and fellowship. The meat eater did not reject the vegetarian for his scruple. It was the vegetarian who tended to judge (condemn) the meat eater. Thus, he would become sectarian and divisive trying to force his convictions on all others.

Paul forbid that he should judge his brother. That was a part of “the doctrine” which he had delivered to them (Rom. 16:17). He had to respect his brother in a united fellowship in spite of their diversity in matters of faith. So it was with the keeping of days. So it was with circumcision. So it is with us today with our differing scruples and practices. When we begin to abridge the liberties of other children of God and demand their conformity to our beliefs in order to be in our fellowship, we lead in forming a divisive party. And, brethren, that is heresy! Those who demand conformity to their convictions are not the weak brothers who are being tempted to sin by the brothers demanding no conformity.

Nobody had to change his convictions about circumcision, eating meats, or observing days. We do not have to change our scruples today in order to be united, but we must cease judging and rejecting each other because of those convictions.

Most all of us can accept those in Christ who are more scrupulous than we are. The meat eater can accept the vegetarian. He is not at liberty to brand him as an anti or as being narrow, ignorant, or stubborn. Those who have Sunday School accept those who do not. But most of us have been led to reject brothers in Christ who exercise more freedom than we do. For example, those who circumcised found it hard to accept the uncircumcised, as though their relation to the Father depended upon it, while the uncircumcised had no problem accepting the circumcised.

Those who have instrumental accompaniment to their singing have no inclination to reject those who do not, but those who do not use it have insisted that they cannot fellowship as brothers those who use instruments. So, this pattern of our acceptance and rejection fits all of the issues of each generation. Our problem is not circumcision, meats, or days, but it may be Sunday School, paid ministers, cooperation of churches, communion glasses, instrumental music, divorce, prophecies, the Holy Spirit, or any other of the many debatable issues on which we hold differing convictions.

Who could expect that we be sane and consistent in all matters? Here is but a sample of our crazy thinking: our elders bind heavy burdens and then condemn as disruptive those who throw them off. Leaders encourage home study of the Bible, but when a group meets in a home to study together, it is considered clandestine, rebellious, and factious. Countless differences in belief are expressed in our adult classes with no threat to fellowship until someone suggests that we are to have unity in spite of diversity. Visitors from any and all churches are invited to participate freely in our services, but if they ask to be on our church roll, we say that we cannot have fellowship (mutual participation) with them! The unscriptural church roll is an invention of ours for judging others and determining with whom we may participate “officially” without compromise!

Again, who is heretical and divisive — the one who is accepting or the one who is rejecting? Who draws the lines defining a new party? Be honest with yourself in answering; you need not respond to me.

The zealous sister who considers my teaching that we accept all other children of God as pure heresy should be concerned that her rejection of me for my loving acceptance may be the purest form of heresy — if there is such a thing as pure heresy.

Chapter 38

I Am A Debtor

Only the Lord can know all the people who have influenced my life and ministry. Although I might have felt at times that I was struggling alone, I must recognize that countless others have given me support in many ways, have helped my grow, and have become partners in the work that God has given me. I want to express appreciation for some of my benefactors knowing that I cannot mention them all.

My most faithful supporter and encourager is **Lea**, my loving and forbearing companion of forty-four years. Proposing new ideas and evaluating mine, she is my best critic. Lea is patient with me when I postpone household chores and social obligations in order to do my writing, correspondence, and mailing. As I have told you before, I count this ministry as a joint effort with her as an equal partner. The Lord knows that I need her. I thank him that I am so blessed.

Because I have spared you from any display of pictures of my super grandchildren, you surely have tolerated my one indulgence of using cartoon drawings done by our oldest grandson, **Daniel Hook**. He is fifteen years old. With pride I include his work along with mine. (Webmaster's Note: Unfortunately these illustrations have not been added to the web version yet.)

In the decade of the 1970's, I began to see my need for redirection more clearly. During that time I received tapes regularly of the lessons of **Wesley Reagan** who served the Burke Road Church in Pasadena, Texas. Through them I shared his agonizing struggle to find a Christ-centered religion and a servant capacity for the church. He helped me greatly in discovering the heart and soul of the Christian religion.

Through the years, writing was never my thing. In a few instances, however, I sent manuscripts to **Reuel Lemmons** which he published in *Firm Foundation*. I was surprised and pleased that he would use my material, the first article being printed in 1961. By the use of my material, Reuel greatly encouraged me to write. Some of the essays in my books appeared in his publication. I wrote a letter of inquiry to him in 1982. In response he scribbled an answer to it and returned it, and he added "You are doing some *good* writing." Coming from such a respected editor, that compliment was a tremendous encouragement for me. He could not have realized the impact it would have on me.

When my first book, [*Free In Christ*](#), came out, I sent Reuel one of the copies. Within a week I received a treasured postcard with this message:

"Dear Cecil-

Thanks for the book. I'm glad you got it in print. You have kicked so many sacred cows it is quiet {sic} evident that you will suffer one of two fates: Either be run over in the stampede {sic} you have caused, or else be gored by the bulls you have enraged. In either {sic} case the final result is somber.

Seriously, that's good writing. It is well thought out and expertly articulated. It will make people think. Most of them will not agree with you but it could be *they* have the problem.

Keep doing it. There is more good stuff where this came from. Let's have another as soon as you can get to it. - Reuel."

I am indebted to him for his generous encouragement for me to write.

In my time of restudy I began to read **Carl Ketcherside's** publications. His honest handling of doctrinal matters made me overcome the prejudice that I had against him due to the slanderous accusations of other brethren. That patient and loving man helped me to see that I had labored under a yoke of law all my life. He did much to set me free.

A number of times I wrote him. He always took time to respond and encourage, wherever he was on his many journeys. His notes to me written on his clogged typewriter or in perfect penmanship are among my treasures. Although I had seen him and had shaken his hand only two times before, Lea and I had the happy privilege of visiting with him privately for two hours the year before he died. My debt to him is enormous.

I faintly remember seeing **Leroy Garrett** when we were students at ACC but I did not see him again for about forty-five years. I had heard his name anathematized by well-meaning brethren so that I was skeptical of his writings. But in my time of restudy, I began to read *Restoration Review* and found that he was saying things that we all needed to hear. He helped me much in clearing up doctrinal matters and allowing me to see the grace of God.

After I began writing, on impulse I sent an article to Leroy and, much to my amazement, he published it. He invited me to send more, and I have been doing it ever since. I continue to be in awe that my cotton-patch material would be in the same journal with that of a Harvard and Princeton graduate who has taught in universities all his career. Not only has he helped me greatly in understanding the Scriptures, he has encouraged me to write also.

In recent years, Lea and I have had a number of visits with Leroy and Ouida and have found them to be gracious, loving, and hospitable. Their friendship is treasured. Leroy has always been a free man. His writings reflect that. He always stays several jumps ahead of us in order to challenge us in new ideas.

Leroy, Carl, and Wes have had the conviction and courage to be on the cutting edge for many years. They have met the resistance and born the onslaughts of others who felt free to berate them. I owe them much. Thank God for such leaders.

When I completed the manuscript for my first book, *[Free In Christ](#)*, I could find no publisher who would touch it, and I certainly did not have the resources with which to publish it. But the Lord had a total surprise for me. He sent **Charley Elrod**, a local brother who was willing to finance the printing of 3000 copies for free distribution. He made possible a ministry that has gone beyond any of our dreams. Much credit is due to Charley for any and all good the books

have accomplished. In spite of his having undergone some severe trials since that noble deed, surely God has treasured blessings in store for him.

Since I gave no credits by name in the first printing of *Free In Christ*, I want now to thank **Jim** and **Ruth Ash**, of Dallas, for their great financial help. They gave generously for postage and to us in our whole ministry. They and Charley Elrod have given the largest gifts to boost this ministry. The most consistent donor has been **Lou Rife**, a brother who lives in Cookeville, Tennessee whom we have not met. Lea and I thank God for these and all other partners.

About the time my first book came out, liberated people in the area of Ventura, California began meeting on the campus of the college there. **Lyle “Nick” Ensminger** ordered copies for this Channel Islands church to study together, and they have invited us for two visits with them. Later, they surprised us with money to purchase a copier. That wonderful tool housed in our middle bedroom has proved to be invaluable. How did I ever operate without it!

Because I dub so many tapes to send out, a local friend, **Bill Abbott**, gave a portable cassette player with double speed dubbing. Then, last March at Tulsa, **Rayleen McLendon**, whom I had seen only once before, gave me her Recordex high-speed dubbing machine. This equipment is serving many people, thanks to Bill and Rayleen.

Another local friend, **Morris F. “Mo” Rector**, kept insisting on helping me to get a computer for my word processing. Reluctantly, I have him a few names of donors to my ministry. He had associated with **Bob Scott**, of Little Rock, in barbershop singing and spoke to him about the matter. Bob agreed to mail out the letters. Response was immediate. They got me a very good system that is compatible with a desk-top publisher for typesetting. I had never used a word processor but have found it eliminates most of the tedious work of writing and preparing manuscripts. I am deeply grateful for it.

Those who contributed for it are **Wayne and Georgia Freiling**, **Bill and Virginia Abbott**, and **Byron and Kay Bradfute** of New Braunfels; **Rufus Gonder**, McMinnville, Tennessee; **Cecil Glover**, Amarillo, Texas; **Brad Hembree**, Shawnee, Oklahoma; **Kenyon Wells**, Lexington, South Carolina; **James and Sharon Harris**, Sheffield, Alabama; **Bob and Gretchen Gleaves**, Brentwood, Tennessee; **Lou and Gwen Rife**, Cookeville, Tennessee; and **James and Sammie Dillon**, McMinnville, Tennessee. Except for the local donors, I have met only three of these people. I appreciate their trust in me and their partnership in this exciting ministry of freedom in Christ.

Many other people have sent money in varying generous {but not enormous} amounts to enable the free distribution of *Free In Christ*. Because of this, Lea and I consider that the Lord has given us a ministry; so we have relinquished the profits from thousands of those books in order to spread the message. May God reward each of you for your generous partnership.

A person can proofread the writing of someone else much more than his own material. I am grateful to **Brian Casey** for his diligent work in this area. He and Mariann live in Newark, Delaware. You may find errors in this book, but blame me for them, for I revise and format the manuscripts after he has corrected them, and that opens the door for many errors.

God has sent all these wonderful people into our lives in a ministry that reaches further than Lea and I could have imagined. The books have gone into all the world. Through person-to-person advertising, we have been enabled to distribute 24,000 copies of [*Free In Christ*](#) as of July 1990. We depend on you to pass the books on to those that may be helped by them. My prayers go with each book that God may use it to help someone. We thank God for all of you who help and encourage. I am a debtor to so many people.

Many of you have comforted us with the assurance that you pray for us. For that we are grateful. It is always a joy to receive your letters, calls, and visits. God continues to enlarge our ministry, blessing us with strength, resources, and fellow-workers. To him be the praise.