

# **Free to Accept**

Cecil Hook

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## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

“Are you going to write another book?” friends have continued to inquire. I usually answer, “Not likely; I have already written a lot more than I know!”

Although I have published four volumes in this series, I have never really written a book. That is, at no time have I set out to produce a volume on one theme. I began to write essays which were published in journals. As I continued to write, the accumulation of those papers was put into book form.

Those editors who have printed my stuff have encouraged me greatly. Use of my material could easily put them on the endangered species list. Greatest use of my writings was made by Leroy Garrett in his *Restoration Review*. Less frequent users, in descending order, were *Firm Foundation*, *Ensign*, *The Examiner*, *One Body*, *Kingdom Counsel*, *Integrity*, and *Refreshing Waters*. I am grateful that they would introduce my thoughts to you.

Since my retirement from the professional ministry, God has given me an outreach that I never could have anticipated. He has sent the books over the world mostly by means of person-to-person advertising. Readers have been generous and supportive. Many have become loyal partners in ministry. I thank God for you continually.

Truthfully, I can repeat that I am amazed that people read my stuff. Many times when persons have called to tell me how my efforts have affected their lives, I thank them for their kind words, explaining, “God spoke through a donkey once before, and I suppose he can do it again!” But the donkey deserves no credit for his speaking or *her* speaking, for Balaam’s donkey was female.

Rather than “taking a stand” on the “issues,” I continue to walk through them. There is no time to stop investigation. Who wants to crystallize like a pillar of salt? Once a person is able to break free of the yoke of law, every time he or she reads the scriptures, new meanings jump out. And we wonder why we never saw them before.

Several chapters of this book deal specifically with our accepting others in Christ. It is my hope in each theme to promote unity among believers. My sincere, but sectarian, attitude misdirected me dreadfully. My rejection of others in my career as a preacher still haunts me. Now I am happy to welcome all even as he has welcomed me for the glory of God. When we all practice that, unity will prevail and God will be glorified.

Thank you for tolerating me. Thank you for recommending my books to others. Thank you for continuing to pass the free copies of [Free In Christ](#) along to other searchers.

Every chapter in this book bears the refinement of Brian Casey, though you are not aware of it. He graciously proofreads all of my materials. He goes much further than checking for *typos*. He helps me with sentence structure, clarity of expression, agreement of verbs and nouns, and all other aspects of grammar. Both you and I benefit from his diligent work. The errors you find in this book are due to my revising the material after he sends it back to me.

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Lea is an equal partner in all our work together. For forty-eight years she has been my strongest encourager and kindest critic.

Our kids, Paul and Mira Prince, have just bought equipment with which to set the type for this project. Their willing skills will add some needed class to my work.

My prayers go with each book and with each reader.

Cecil Hook, November 1993

## Chapter 1

### UNITING OR ACCEPTING

We are hearing of unity meetings in which the participants work to break down the walls that separate our differing groups. Those efforts are to be commended and encouraged. What I am about to say is not intended to be overly critical of them.

Instead of having *unity* meetings, however, should we not be having *accepting* meetings? God has already created the unity. All who are in Christ are in one body. The church is one and cannot be divided into two or more churches or bodies. When we separate into groups because of our differences, we only become sectarian. The person who rejects other brothers and sisters in Christ is sectarian in spirit and practice. It is not the meeting in different groups that is sinful but it is the refusing to recognize others who are in God's family. God put us in the same body; let us learn to accept each other.

If we are in Christ, we are children of God and members of his spiritual family. He has only one family. Our efforts should not be directed toward creating one family of God but to the accepting of other brothers and sisters whom God has given us in the family he has already created. It is a sin against the father to reject his other children.

In the parable about the prodigal son, the father had a united family even while the prodigal was away and also after his return. The two sons were brothers in the same family of the same father all the time. Upon the return of the profligate one, the older brother rejected him. They were still brothers but one judged the other to be unworthy when he should have left the judging to the father. The father had accepted him fully. We condemn ourselves when we judge and turn away from our brother.

It was the brother who was so obedient, good, and right who was the greater disappointment. His rejection of his brother, if sustained, would be more of a long-range threat to the family than the sins of the flesh of the brother. The sins of immorality were repented of, but the parable leaves us with a self-righteous older brother who thought he was too good to stoop to receive his brother who had erred. That is the same kind of rejecting attitude that plagues the older brothers in God's family today.

To have accepted the errant brother back would not have given endorsement to his pigpen conduct. Brotherhood did not originate from nor depend upon their conduct, but it was the result of having the same father. Surely, the young son had lived a filthy life of which neither the father nor the son could approve. But the father was the only one who could rightly judge, disinherit, or disclaim him. The older brother was stuck with him!

In the dead church at Sardis there were a few good brothers who had not wandered into the far country. "Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments." The delinquent ones were called upon to repent, but the older brothers were not called upon to judge and reject them.

Brothers do not decide to fellowship each other in order to unite in the father's family. It is not *fellowship him* and then *unite with him*, but rather recognize the fellowship that the family relationship creates.

Should the Church of Christ accept the Christian Church, and vice versa? No, for acceptance is an individual matter. Each of us must accept all the children of God without regard to the particular names worn to distinguish their sectarian exclusiveness.

Children of God are separated into splintered groups. When the various individuals in these churches accept other brothers and sisters across our divisive lines, we can come to appreciate that there is one body, one church.

Since all who are in the one body do not accept each other, it seems appropriate that we have *accepting meetings* in order to work toward healing the sores caused by our sin of alienation. But since acceptance is not a corporate action, you need not wait for meetings to bring it about. Just begin individually to accept all of God's children with whom he has united you in one body.

## Chapter 2

### WHO IS A CHRISTIAN?

Alexander Campbell's response to this question raised in the famous Lunenburg Letter aroused a long discussion by those who disagreed with him. The matter is still being debated.

Why cannot we lay this question to rest once for all? It is because there is no definition of a Christian in the scriptures!

The scriptures do not say, "They called themselves Christians." There is no record of a follower of Jesus taking that designation for himself or applying it to others. Neither do we read that God called them Christians. But we do read that "in Antioch the disciples were for the first time called Christians" (Acts 11:26).

Somebody called the disciples Christians. Who was that somebody? Not other disciples. Not God. Evidently, the populace of Antioch did. Agrippa used the term with a sneer (Acts 16:28), but Paul avoided use of that name in his reply to Agrippa and in all of his writings. In their persecutions believers were being called Christians disparagingly, in the same manner in which some had been referred to as "the sect of the Nazarenes" before, and Peter urged them to accept that supposedly derogatory designation unashamedly in a manner which would glorify God (1 Peter 4:16).

Who were being called Christians? Disciples. That is what they were disciples! But they were being called something else. Why do we make such a big thing of calling ourselves Christians and so seldom identify ourselves as disciples?

Who, then, is a disciple? After his resurrection Jesus sent the eleven disciples out to preach the gospel. He told them, "Go therefore and *make disciples* of all nations, *baptizing* them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching* them to observe all that I have commanded you..." (Matt. 28:19f). Acceptance of the gospel made people *disciples*. The disciples were to be baptized. Then they were taught as disciples. Belief in the gospel made them disciples and then, after baptism, they were guided and nurtured toward maturity as followers by the doctrines.

A disciple is a learner, believer, or follower. When a person develops a conviction about Jesus that makes him want to learn more and follow him, that person is a disciple. He is a disciple from the time of the germination of the seed into faith until he dies as one mature in Christ.

We are at different points on the road, but need we try to define certain stages on that heavenward journey when one becomes acceptable to God — and to us? Where are those definitive milestones between the start and the finish? Although there is a continuous process of development between the conception of new human life and its senectitude, there is no period of unacceptability. We recognize the living personhood all along the way. So it is with being a disciple.

Suppose that the follower holds to some error in the earlier stages of belief. Must we not reject him or her? No, for all would be rejected. None of us ever reaches total freedom from error. Jesus said to teach the disciples all his commands. Teaching is a continuous process needed even by the most aged and mature of us.

Why are we so eager to define who is a Christian? Is it not to give some measurement enabling us to accept or reject readily? We settle for artificial distinctions. Why are we so eager to reject others? Is it to satisfy our smugness? Is it a fear that others may defile us? Fellowship with immature learners is no more compromising than including infants in our society. To recognize a person as a fellow disciple does not mean we approve his errors or misconduct; otherwise, we would cut ourselves off from most of those in our congregations.

Baptism has been our hang-up. It is our line in the sand. We judge anyone who has not crossed that line. While it is true that baptism is an essential command of Jesus, so are the rest of his directives. But in his growth Christ's student need not master the understanding and obedience to all of them before he or she can find the favor of God. Who could ever claim such an achievement? Upon learning and understanding any previously overlooked requirement, if the lifelong student refuses to comply, then that person has ceased being a follower indeed. And that is scary for all would-be achievers, for no one observes all divine instructions. So who are we to judge others at their different stations on the same road?

Millions of the disciples with whom we will have no association have been baptized according to their understanding of what baptism entails. Because they have not observed our scruples about baptism, we have felt that we can rightly sit on the throne of judgment to declare them unfit for our fellowship. Instead of considering them as fellow-learners who still need our loving instruction, we have counted them as adversaries. We as servants of the Master judge his other servants and exclude them as his enemies. Can you judgmentally refuse other disciples of Jesus and expect his hearty approval?

The followers of Jesus in your congregation lack in points of understanding, do not hold identical beliefs, fall short of perfect obedience, and fail in attitude and conduct, but you share the common life with them. Why accept them while disdaining other followers who have similar shortcomings?

Who is a disciple? Jesus gave us the identifying marks of disciples. "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). Jesus told some believers, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples" (John 8:31). And, "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples" (John 15:8). Wonder why Jesus left baptism out? You may reply that baptism is included in "if you continue in my word." If true, so are all the other commands, and Jesus did not elevate baptism above the rest as the crucial test. A sincere learner may be loving, continue in his word, and bear much fruit without ever understanding and conforming to your or my scruples. God will judge righteously; we are to accept lovingly.

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If you consider that disciples and Christians are identical, please consider this: disciples exist before and apart from baptism. Then so must Christians! Disciples must continue to learn and to obey as they are able to understand. Then so must Christians.

## Chapter 3

### “WHY DON’T YOU LEAVE THE CHURCH OF CHRIST?”

While reading some of my material, one woman became so upset that she called me and angrily demanded, “Why don’t you leave the Church of Christ? You hate it so much!”

Several other readers, expressing agreement with my writings, have inquired, “Have you left the Church of Christ?” or “Are you still in the Church of Christ?”

Although these questions are similar, I am convinced that there is a great difference in the understanding of those who asked them. A candid look into their questions in relation to the nature of the church will reveal a contrast between Biblical unity and sectarianism. It may clear some of the barriers to much-needed reformation and acceptance. Let me explore this with you.

On the “birthday of the church,” the word *church* is not even used. Acts 2:47 indicates that the Lord *added to their number (added to them or added together)* day by day those who were being saved. They became God’s congregation, or assembly, in its universal, or catholic, identity. Although the word *church* is a mistranslation of *ekklesia* which means *congregation* or *assembly*, we will accept its common usage in this treatise. Even if the saved were in different localities, they had all been baptized by one Spirit into one body (1 Cor. 12:13). A body has members; the church does not. The church is those who are in the state or condition of being saved, and the saved have no members.

In consideration of the different aspects of their essence, these saved were referred to as the disciples, the believers, the saints, the body, the church, the assembly of God, the church of God, the church of the Lord, etc. and various localized groups were identified as churches of Christ and churches of the saints. None of these descriptive designations of the saved ones was used as a title or proper name for either the church as a whole or for local assemblies.

People did not associate themselves with the church of their choice, for the Lord has only one. He sets all the saved into his one body. But people were not baptized into the church at Jerusalem, Corinth, Antioch, or any other locality. The Lord does not add us to individual congregations but to his universal assembly.

Local groups may go astray. They may become misdirected, corrupt, divisive, exclusive, and/or sectarian-spirited. When a group excludes other disciples because of doctrinal convictions (other than those that deny the basis of the gospel), that group becomes sectarian and divisive. When a group distinguishes itself from others by a name, *even a Biblical designation*, it becomes a denomination. To name is to denominate. Thus a segment of the saved within the universal congregation becomes a sectarian denomination by its exclusive stance.

The Lord does not add us to local groups, nor does the Spirit baptize us into them. We choose fellowship in them. This is a point that our people generally have failed to grasp. We have believed that when we are baptized, we are automatically added to the local congregation. But we have never faced the perplexity that God would be adding people to sectarian groups which

will tolerate no fellowship with each other. Some are able to admit that God adds saved ones to various splinter groups as long as they wear the denominating name *Church of Christ*. But if they wear some other distinguishing name like *Christian Church*, *Community Church*, or *Church of God*, no way!

This presents a special problem for our time of sectarian divisions. Where is that universal church to which the Lord adds the saved? There may be some unnamed nonsectarian house churches or independent assemblies of it, but it is not in any identifiable organized form on this earth. Generally, the saved ones have identified with various congregations of people who are imperfect in understanding, misdirected, in error (including you and me!), sectarian spirited, divisive, and are eager to perpetuate their particular party. There are no perfect congregations or organized groups! Not one! There never has been one! There never will be one! All the brothers we have are brothers in error! We are all in company with our own kind!

Can a person remain saved in one of these divisions? Yes, not because he is in it but in spite of his being in it. You can, and do, live in association with liars, thieves, drunkards, adulterers, proud people, misdirected people, and sectarian-spirited people without approving or partaking of their sins. You are not accountable for that which you disavow and decry. In younger days I would look out over the congregation and think how pure and proper all those good people of God were. But I have lived long enough now to know that all the abovementioned sins can be found in most any sizeable congregation. And it may not have to be too sizeable! Can God's saved be among them? Certainly, for there is no other situation in which he finds his disciples. One is called upon to refrain from all corruption of morals, doctrine, and practice, but no one can do it perfectly. All are sinners. We are sinners saved by grace. The church is God's collection of sinners saved by grace. Their only claim to perfection is that God counts them as though they have no sins. He credits Christ's sinlessness to their accounts. Paul would have us meekly to judge ourselves rather than our brother (1 Cor. 11:27-32; Rom. 14).

Briefly, I have pictured the situation all the saved are in. We have refused to look at this reality, denied its truthfulness, and resisted those who teach it. While garnishing the tombs of Stone, Campbell, and the pioneers of our Movement, we stone those who currently teach these very things they taught.

Those friends who ask, "Are you still in the Church of Christ?" are aware of the difference in the church of Christ in its universal sense and the Church of Christ in its local entities. They know that the Lord added me to his church by saving me, and they are not asking if I have left that fellowship, nor are they accusing me of losing my salvation. These inquirers understand that, after the Lord saved me, I became a part of a segregated group called the Church of Christ. They correctly understand that by the one Spirit I was not baptized into a local group that was less than the whole. I joined one. All right, for you who abhor the word joined, I *placed membership*!

Both *membership* and *placing membership* are unscriptural terms. One does not hold membership among the saved, and if one did, it would not be something that could be placed somewhere. We devised both euphemistic expressions to accommodate our joining with divided groups.

The Lord adds us to the one body, but we then align ourselves with distinctive groups like the Church of Christ, the Christian Church, or others. We even have a menu of choices of different kinds of Churches of Christ with which to become affiliated. The Lord doesn't add us to all of them or any of them. We choose them without divine directive. Such choices make sectarian denominations. Our fellowship in the universal church is not an *at large* membership in all the splintered groups.

When we exclude others of God's children from our group, we become sectarian. When we give that fellowship a name to distinguish it from others, we designate it as a denomination. Who can deny, while maintaining integrity, that each segment of the Church of Christ and Christian Church fits the definition of a sectarian denomination?

Using a Biblical term to distinguish the group does not alter the case. Accepting *church of Christ* instead of *Church of Christ* does not remedy the error, either. That violates proper grammar because *church of Christ* is being used as a proper noun on the sign, bulletin, letterhead, church and telephone directories, and in conversation. That evasion fools no one but ourselves, and some of us are catching on! A local, exclusive *church of Christ* is not identical with the universal *church of Christ*. It is high time for us to recognize that, eat our humble pie, and begin to make correction.

So when these people ask me if I am still in the Church of Christ, they are asking if I have changed my membership from one sectarian group to another. They realize that there is no *one true church in organized form* out there somewhere for me to join.

In answer to them I say that I am still in a sectarian-spirited Church of Christ, but I denounce its exclusive claims and accept disciples across our denominational lines. What other alternative do I have?

I had no lengthy discussion with the sincere woman who asked why I do not leave the Church of Christ, so the things I say here are my conjectures. She holds the traditional view that the Lord adds the saved to the universal *church of Christ*, which is identified as the *Church of Christ* congregations. She thinks she never joined a splinter group when she placed membership where she attends. It could not be sectarian. But she betrays her own ambiguity, as we shall see.

Let me ask her and you a question. If I should want to leave the Church of Christ or church of Christ, how would I go about it?

Give me a Bible answer. If it is the church that the Lord added me to, how may I get out of it? Since the Lord added me to it, only he can subtract me from it! He may do that at the judgment, but not before. When we presume to put people out of the church or exclude them from it, we are most arrogant. If we consider the congregation as identical with the universal church, then we are presuming to put people out of, or excluding them from, the Lord's church!

Was she really asking me if I had left the universal church? I think not. She was thinking of my joining another sectarian group. Without her realizing it, this woman indicated that she thought of the Church of Christ as an entity which we may choose to join or leave. That can happen only

in a sectarian division. But the Lord does not give me that choice. By *his choice* I was added to his one church; by *my choice* I was added to a local, exclusive church. I can remove myself from the local, sectarian group; only he can cast me out of his church.

In answering her question, I will say that I am still in the *church of Christ* (universal) and also a *Church of Christ* division. I remain in the latter because it is my heritage and I have not found a better one, but not because I think all of God's saved are in it. I recognize my fellowship with all of the saved regardless of where they are. God still has only one "assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven" even though its constituents are separated from each other in exclusive parties.

I am convinced that I have pictured the only practical course for unity. Too long we have presumed that God demands total conformity of faith and practice in congregations of identical pattern-perfect people in a perfect church! The church is composed of imperfect people whom God has called together and saved. But they are still imperfect. And when you assemble a group of them together, you have an imperfect congregation. There have been no exceptions, and there never will be. As lifelong sinners saved by grace, we must continue to "welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Rom. 15:7). Thus we "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." May his grace bring you peace.

## Chapter 4

### THE INIQUITY OF THE FATHERS

Does our just God hold children accountable for the sins of their parents? An emphatic and clear answer is: “The soul that sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son” (Ezek. 18:20).

If that were all that is written on the subject, the answer would be concise and simple. But God himself declared, “For I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me” (Exo. 20:5). In search for harmony of these seemingly contradictory declarations, let me offer a few thoughts and make a specific application for us today.

The statement from Exodus is a part of the Ten Commandments forbidding idolatry. God had chosen a nation to uphold his name in a pagan world. He was jealous of any straying of their affections toward other gods. If they should turn to idols, which they often did, His disciplinary punishments would be felt by succeeding generations until they returned to him. Inspired history reveals that Israel turned away many times, and succeeding generations felt the jealous wrath brought by the iniquity of the fathers.

This was a national punishment which did not necessarily relate to the personal sins of each individual. No doubt, even in the time of total national abandonment into idolatry, there were individuals who were not guilty. God always has a remnant — seven thousand who do not bow down to Baal. Although these persons would suffer the national chastisement, their souls would not be lost.

Here is where Ezekiel’s statements fit in. Jerusalem’s unfaithfulness was bringing God’s wrath on Judah. The people developed a proverb of complaint against God: “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge” (Ezek. 18:1-4). They were complaining that the children were bearing the sins of the parents, but God spoke of their individual accountability: “Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sins shall die.” This is speaking of loss of the soul due to personal guilt rather than corrective punishment brought on the nation.

From this we can conclude that people may suffer various temporal consequences of the sins of their parents, but they do not bear the guilt of their parents. If they continue in the sins of their forebears, they will be guilty because of personal sins. If they do not embrace the sins of their fathers, there is no personal guilt.

While we conclude that God still works within nations, we are not to think that he has a chosen nation today nor that America is a counterpart to Israel. We who are subjects of Christ are the spiritual Israel. As such we are not judged as a church but as individuals.

In time various corruptions have affected the universal church. From our fathers we have inherited a sectarianized, divided community of believers which we did not create. Even though

we are adversely affected by these organized divisions. This sin of sectarianism cannot be laid to our account.

Just as there were righteous, God-fearing people like Elijah and the seven thousand in the times of Israel's idolatry, there are non-sectarian people in our divided communities of believers. The children of God are scattered among these divided groups. They did not form them, but they inherited the results of the sins of others. There is no such thing as an organized "one, true church" to be found with which you may align yourself.

For many years I reasoned that I only obeyed the gospel and let the Lord add me to his universal church, and that I never joined a sectarian group. But I came to see that when a group of disciples refuses fellowship with others in Christ, it becomes a sect. When it accepts a name to distinguish itself from other children of God, it becomes a denomination. Did God add me to the local Church of Christ (or church of Christ, if you prefer) which rejects other Christians and wears a distinguishing name? I had to be honest with myself. God added me to his one universal church, but I joined a local group which is a sectarian denomination. I could explain that I did not join a church but that I just placed membership. What is the difference other than terminology? I aligned myself with an exclusive group. And therein is the problem.

Most of those Christians in the various parties believe in the correctness of their distinctive groups and give their consent and energy to protect and promote them. Although they do not bear the guilt of their predecessors, they incur their own guilt by perpetuating a sectarian spirit which maintains their exclusiveness.

There are Christians in Babylon, however, who decry the division caused by the rejection of others in Christ. They accept God's children without regard to denominational boundaries. They are caught in a circumstance that suffers from the results of division, just as all present-day disciples are, yet they are not sectarian in attitude. Such people are guilty of neither inherited sin of division nor personal sins of judgmental rejection of fellow believers.

There is no such thing as a pure congregation of the Lord's people because they are all composed of erring brethren. Each man is to examine himself rather than his brother. A person is not guilty of his brother's sins unless he approves them. Fellowship is not approval, but it is sharing life in Christ. The Lord sets us in that fellowship. We do not choose our brothers, judge them, or bear their sins. "The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself" (Ezek. 18:20).

Israel was always called upon to reform and return, but never to start a new nation. Because congregations are composed of misunderstanding and erring humans, we must be in a continuous process of reform. There is no advice from an inspired pen, however, for Christians to abandon erring brethren and start a pure church. Not even the sin-plagued Corinthian fellowship or the seven churches of Asia with their glaring iniquities. That remedy for purity was devised by partisans. It is a work of the flesh, not a refinement of the Spirit.

Let us repeat: You and I do not bear the guilt for the divisions brought into existence by our forefathers though we suffer many ill consequences of their sins. We are individually

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accountable though for our perpetuation of the sectarian spirit shown in rejecting brothers in Christ.

## Chapter 5

### OUR JUDICIAL SYSTEM

Even though it probably was boring to you then, in your high school class you were taught that there are three functions of civil governments: the legislative to make the law, the executive to enforce the law, and the judicial to interpret the law.

In our country these are separate branches of government. In countries with a monarch, the responsibilities have been distributed variously. Where a dictatorship prevails, the entire system may be tightly controlled by one person.

What sort of rule prevails in the spiritual realm? Are there legislative, executive, and judicial functions ruling the church?

God, working through Christ and the Holy Spirit, is the legislator and executor in the Kingdom of Heaven. Although his will has been made known through Spirit-guided men, no man has ever been delegated to make laws or enforce them. Inspired men offered help in interpreting and applying the will of God in some specific instances through their epistles.

From those inspired men we may discern principles for judging many questions that arise in our effort to do what God wants. But our modern issues are not all addressed by the inspired men. For instance, the Scriptures do not mention church owned property, contraception, voluntary abortion, or the clapping of hands in the assembly. Who is to judge questions about such things today? Who is authorized to define right and wrong on current issues? Whose interpretation is to prevail?

Under the code of law given through Moses, there was no question that God required Israel to remember the Sabbath. That command can serve as an example to make our point. All could agree that they should not work on the Sabbath, and all sincere Israelites were eager to keep the day holy by refraining from labor. But the Law did not define work! Who was to judge and declare what was work and what was not?

The Jews believed there were two kinds of law given to Moses, the written law and the oral law known as the Torah. Both were accepted as equally authentic. The concept of oral law was not devised to evade or compromise the written law. Their sincere purpose was to determine the intent of the law as it applied to specific questionable cases after Moses was gone. Through succeeding generations, spiritual leaders made judgments of how the law applied in current situations not described or defined in the written law.

Those judicial decisions of the fathers were respected as being definitive on points where the law was not. In a similar manner, when a constitutional case is tried in our civil courts, the decision becomes a precedent that is respected in later trials. The accumulation of their interpretations came to be known as the *Traditions of the Fathers*.

Jesus' conflict with the rabbis, scribes, and Pharisees was not over the Law but over the traditions, which they bound as law. The judiciary had usurped the legislative! David W. Chadwell has given us a most helpful study of this development in his *Beware of the Leaven of the Pharisees* (Quality Publications, P.O. Box 1060, Abilene, Texas 79604).

The Roman Catholic concept and practice is similar to that of the Jews. They accept the Bible as the inspired written law, but they declare a need of a judicial system to interpret the law in each generation. Beginning with the supposed primacy of Peter, they have established the papacy and hierarchy as the living voice of God on earth through which God gives the oral law. Through this means, the church has added new interpretations through the generations which have become equal in authority with the Scriptures. Thus the church usurped the legislative powers. Their compilation of Canon Law is larger than the Bible.

Believing these rules to be the official judgments of the living voice of God, the individuals felt no concern about interpreting and understanding the Bible. They were catechized in the teachings of the church to enable their proper obedience. In fact, any attempt of an individual to interpret the Bible was considered to be a sinful affront to the church. Not only did the Catholic system develop a judiciary role, it also claimed an executive, enforcing power which it exercised by penances, excommunication, interdiction, and even executions. By this means that we have described, it was able to preserve an *enforced unity by conformity*. There could be no splinter groups who accepted the papacy. (In fairness to the Catholic Church, let me say that much change is currently taking place and their people are encouraged now to study the Bible.)

### **Private Interpretation**

The Protestant Reformation put things in a different light. The reformers accepted the Bible as the only guide from God, with him as both the Lawmaker and Enforcer. But what of the judiciary role? It was returned to the disciple! They advanced the right of individual interpretation along with the priesthood of the believer. Of course, we are speaking of our discerning the intent of God's message for ourselves rather than judging others. God has delegated all condemnatory judgment to the Son.

Although that is an exciting concept, in view of what we have already reviewed, we can see caution flags go up immediately! Confusion lies ahead!

In seeking to apply the will of God to their own situations, people will judge the meaning of the Scriptures influenced by many variables. All will not have equal access to the Scriptures. Intelligence and literary training will vary widely. Each believer will be influenced and conditioned strongly by his culture which is molded by nationality, political climate, great thinkers, educators, and philosophers, and the period of history in which he lives. Even his emotional makeup of right brain/left brain dominance will affect his judgments.

In view of these factors, there is no possibility that all people will reach the same understanding in applying the Scriptural teachings. Will people with differing judgments, opinions, scruples, convictions, and practices be acceptable to God? Or must the community of believers develop a judicial system to determine the intent of God's message in each problematic situation?

Historically, those who have tried to interpret for the rest of us have differed and divided. They have developed creeds which serve as fences and boundaries. Is unity hopeless?

Some clarifications concerning justification are in order at this point. The first covenant involved a code of law, the Law of Moses. Historically, the Catholic Church has held a more legalistic concept of the New Covenant scriptures. So they have emphasized justification by keeping works of law. Strict legal details of rituals have been demanded to avoid infraction and to gain the blessing sought.

Although that approach is being moderated in this generation, it prevailed in the time of the Protestant Reformation.

### **The Motivating Principle**

The reformers directed us to the Scriptural concepts of justification by grace through faith rather than by works of law or merit. We gain right standing apart from any system of law. *Obeying the gospel* (2 Thes. 1:8) or *becoming obedient to the faith* (Acts 6:7) is not the submission to another code of law but the acceptance of the grace offered to those who will identify with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. In this essay, my theme does not relate to justification but to our sanctification, our life of holiness, growth, and endurance. Are there rules or laws that we must follow in our holy living? Yes, but these are no legal code. These may be boiled down to a single principle of action.

Our motivating principle of action is love. That is the law of Christ, the law of liberty, the royal law, the law which they had heard from the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and the great commandment which fulfills all "if there be any other commandment."

When your actions are motivated by love, you are fulfilling God's will. You need not seek someone else to interpret that for you, for you alone are able to judge your motivation and action. You accept your own judicial responsibility and are accountable only to God for your decision.

The Scriptures provide instructions, examples, exhortations, and warnings which give guidance in expressing our love to man and God. Our responses to the scriptural instructions become expressions of our commitment to God rather than efforts to gain his favor or right standing. As simple as this seems to be for the individual, our judicial problem is not all solved yet.

Many sincere disciples have declared that we do not need to interpret the scriptures but that we should just take them for what they say. That may sound good, but it is woefully simplistic. We will consider the prohibition of killing as an example. This will illustrate the complexity of deciding the intent of God's will in countless other situations.

*Thou shalt not kill* was a part of a code of law. In our time it is still sinful to kill, not because we break a code, but because our principle of action (love) would be violated in killing. Love always fulfilled that law. But may a person with love kill another and remain innocent? Again, things are not all so simple that we have no need to interpret what fulfills the intent of the prohibition.

## Defining The Law

Since killing is not fully defined in the Scriptures, our individual judgment must determine what would be an infraction. Would the following actions be killing which is condemned?

- taking the life of an animal?
- taking life in self-protection or in defense of country?
- executing a criminal or approving of capital punishment?
- preventing conception or voluntary abortion?
- destroying life in an auto accident you caused?
- causing a fatal accident by speeding or carelessness?
- allowing your child's death by failure to buckle him up?
- withholding mechanical life-prolonging aid from the dying?
- allowing a child to drown in your unfenced, unguarded pool?
- discouraging a depressed person who then takes his life?
- losing a patient, as a doctor, due to carelessness?
- encouraging a spouse's smoking and diet that caused death?
- taking one's own life while depressed emotionally?
- exposing a person to AIDS which takes his/her life?
- giving medical advice that causes a person's death?
- refusing medical help in favor of prayer for a dying child?
- failing to rescue an endangered person?
- failing to send food to the starving in other lands?
- wishing for Saddam Hussein to be killed?

Who is to interpret the will of God and judge your guilt or innocence in any or all of those circumstances? Who can define *kill* as prohibited in *thou shalt not kill*? As much as I might like to do it, I cannot bind my judgment on you. I might offer you advice, but you are the only one who can examine your own heart and determine if you were motivated by love with no selfish or impure heart involved.

We have let killing stand as an example of the complexity of applying a rule. Paul used circumcision, the eating of meats, and the observance of days as test cases. Read again Paul's liberating discourse in Romans 14.

When I would bind my scruples on you, he jolts me back to my senses with "Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another?"! Paul defends the right and responsibility of the weakest of brothers by scolding the one who would judge him: "*Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we shall all stand before the*

*judgment seat of God; for it is written 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.' So each of us shall give account of himself to God".*

Through prayerful self-examination you judge your own heart and conduct in light of the Scriptures. Thus you form your own opinions, scruples, conscience, and convictions. Then, *"The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God; happy is he who has no reason to judge himself for what he approves."* For your conclusions, you are not accountable to me, the preachers, the elders, the editors, or anyone else. They may aid your understanding, yet they disagree and lead in different directions. Their only proper course is to accept you. If I am responsible for my own decisions and you are responsible for yours, then neither of us can be responsible for the decisions of the other.

A wide range of individual convictions is tolerated in most of our congregations. The freedom allowed for open discussion of personal scruples varies in our congregations. They do not become problems generally until a person tries to bind them on others. At that point, the one who would make his opinion law thinks he is contending for the truth, but others will consider him as divisive. And he will indeed be divisive if he rejects, or leads others to reject, disciples who do not agree with his point of view.

James erects a STOP! sign: *"He that...judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you that you judge your neighbor?" (James 4:11f).*

### **Fitting Into The Congregation**

So far, we have considered individual judgments only. Now we will get into the really sticky stuff! Who is to decide the intent of God's message in questions that relate to the entire congregation?

In the Stone-Campbell Movement major issues have been made of such matters as the function of women in the organized work and the assembly, unleavened bread or leavened bread, grape juice or wine, one cup (a glass) or individual cups (plastic "glasses"), singing groups, instrumental accompaniment to singing, congregational cooperation, Sunday schools, support of Christian colleges, the hired minister, various matters relating to elders, and other debatable items. People holding opposing convictions about these practices simply cannot serve and worship in the same assembly without offending the conscience of some or curtailing the liberty of others.

The disciple convinced that the use of individual containers in the communion is sinful is not obligated to violate his conscience for the sake of conformity, yet he must not jump from his judicial privilege to the legislative function in an effort to bind his conviction on all others.

In like manner, the woman who cannot sing conscientiously with mechanical accompaniment cannot be expected to sing where instruments are employed. Although this sincere sister judges

that she is right, she cannot make a law which overturns the judgment of equally sincere sisters who think they are right.

These are but two illustrations of the problem of conformity in all the debatable areas mentioned above. Those who disagree may study and discuss, but neither group may rightly seek to override the judgment of the other and bind its decisions on them.

Charitable concessions may be made out of respect for the ones who hold certain convictions. A congregation may give up individual containers, Sunday school, or instrumental accompaniment in order not to offend members who believe those things to be wrong. That can be a generous gesture. But must each congregation give up all practices and teachings which some persons object to?

Some who object to instrumental music still call upon the people who use instruments to give them up for the sake of unity. In doing so they try to blame the instrumentalists for keeping our people apart. If a congregation wishes to heed that plea as an irenic gesture, that is fine. But will the non-instrumentalist make that same concession for unity with those who oppose paid ministers, multiple cups, Bible classes, congregational cooperation, church-owned property, and many other controversial practices? Surely not! The shoe doesn't fit the other foot!

Does sincere endeavor to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace demand that we give up all individual liberties for the sake of peace? It does not. Paul was willing to refrain from eating meat and drinking wine for the sake of his weak brother. But after he informed the brother, he was no longer the weak brother, though he might be the *stubborn* brother. Paul cherished his right to eat and drink (1 Cor. 9:3). He would not allow the vegetarian, the keeper of days, or the contender for circumcision to make a law of his judgmental decisions on such matters. He would not permit the church to be hobbled forever by the binding of every man's convictions on all. The "objector's rule" is a tyranny that usurps the judicial role of all. The list of conscientious objections is limitless. There was room in the fellowship for the sincere ones on both sides of those and other issues. One had no permission to condemn the other, nor was the latter permitted to disdain the former. Read Romans 14 again!

### **Is Unity Possible?**

In view of all this, is unity impossible? Our traditional concept of unity is impossible. I fear that we have not really understood the kind of unity Jesus prayed for and created.

It is unrealistic to think that all of us will ever come to understand everything alike. That has never been the case, even under the tutelage of the apostles. And it is not necessary. Each can serve according to his or her own beliefs with others who have similar convictions. No one is called upon to violate his conscience in order to conform to a group. People who tremble at the thought of singing with a piano may assemble with those of like mind. The person who is shocked by a woman leading singing may gather where men lead. The disciple who demands that one cup be used in the communion may meet with those who believe likewise. Those who are convinced that the church must wear a certain name may serve in a church that wears that name.

We may apply that principle to those in each of the diverse groups of disciples. But you may protest that I am justifying the very divided state that we live in; however, that is not exactly right. There is a valid distinction that I am making.

Although there is no mention of separate groups meeting to accommodate different convictions, we would not rule out the possibility that the Grecians met separately in Jerusalem. The same could be true of those who contended for circumcision, those who continued to keep the Law of Moses, the disciples of John, and the Samaritans. Those who refused to observe days could hardly have participated in the activities of those who were observing them.

A group may find it expedient to write out a statement of its beliefs, aims, practices, and procedures. There is nothing improper about stating what you believe and practice. It does become disastrously wrong, however, for the person or group to demand that all others must conform to the stated judgment. To refuse and reject those who do not conform to it is to become divisive separatists.

Yes, we may rightly serve with others with whom we are comfortable. Our right of private interpretation demands that. But we must recognize the same right given to all brothers in Christ and must continue to share with them in God's family. Regardless of the set of scruples a group is built around, its members have no right to reject equally sincere brothers in the other groups. It is not meeting in separate assemblies that is divisive and sinful; it is the rejecting of others whom the Lord has added to his body that is inexcusably sinful. Rejection is a violation of the love that binds us together.

It is time for us to look over our walls and to reach over our fences to others in Christ saying, "With your interpretation of God's will on some issues, we cannot agree. But we do not impose our convictions on you or make unkind judgments against you. You are our brothers. We are one in the Lord. We love you, pray for you, want to associate with you, and stand ready to work with you in promoting his cause on earth." Such loving gestures would soon crumble our separating walls and dissolve our party loyalties.

Please bear with me a little longer. Jesus did not labor under delusions about the nature and ability of man. When he prayed for unity, he knew that there would never be total conformity and agreement in even a small group of people. But his prayer for unity was fulfilled! We have missed the focus of his prayer.

### **Jesus' Prayer Was Fulfilled!**

Jesus prayed "*that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The glory which thou has given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one...*" (John 17:21f). He and the Father are one. We are in the Father and the Son. We are one in them. Beginning on Pentecost, all the saved are united in them. Through his grace they become "perfectly one!" That is the unity of the Spirit, "for by one Spirit we are all baptized into one body." There is only one body. Disciples may reject

others in it and separate from them to their own condemnation, but man cannot divide it for oneness is an essential nature of the church.

Our revered pioneer, Thomas Campbell, grasped that profound truth and expressed it to us long ago: *“The Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally and constitutionally one; consisting of all those in every place that profess their faith in Christ and obedience to him in all things according to the Scriptures, and that manifest the same by their tempers and conduct.”*

The Campbells understood that God’s saved people were not limited to some exclusive group but that, though they were scattered among the separated groups, the Church of Christ had not lost its essence of being one in God and Christ. They recognized that constitutionally the *ekklesia* is one. They set out to unite the disciples in all the sects. By that they were not calling them from their churches to form a new “undenominational” one. Their plea was for all to cease rejecting those in churches other than their own. To their shame, succeeding generations lost that perception of true unity and made a one hundred and eighty degree reversal.

Fellowship is not with doctrines and practices but with Christ. As it relates to us, *fellowship* is a noun denoting relationship, not a verb identifying something we do. Fellowship is not something we extend or withdraw but it is the relationship granted by God of being one with God and Christ and all who are in them. It is not an approval of the beliefs, practices, or sins of others. All who are in Christ are imperfect, sinful people who are in error on various issues. Fellowship, then, actually equals unity, for all who are in Christ are one. God makes us to stand by his grace in spite of our deficiencies and misdirections. That is our only hope. And what need we more!

Jesus knew that all of us could not understand and apply law in all situations of the dedicated life; so he did not subject us to another legal system. Therefore, we need not develop a new sort of Talmud, Canon Law, or Traditions of the Fathers. Sadly, however, we have tended to do that very thing in our misunderstanding and misdirection, and it has led to our rejection of others for whom Christ died.

What I am saying here does not mean that we must sanction the flagrantly, impenitent immoral person, the one who denies the basis of our hope, or any who are divisive.

### **Only One Measure**

Jesus gave us only one principle of action by which to measure each response in life. That law/principle is not obedience to a code or rituals, but it is love which determines every proper action in the committed life. You, and only you, can discern your motives so as to judge your own conduct. That is Jesus’ wise provision!

These expressed truths may lead you further than you are ready to go. Although we have professed to believe in the right of individual interpretation, our mindset has been to edge on over from the judicial seat to usurp the legislative authority in binding our own convictions on everyone else. Thus we have become more at ease in rejecting others than in accepting them. That is the deadly disease of a divisive, sectarian spirit which is destroying us.

Brothers and sisters of my beloved heritage, is it not high time for us to recognize our sinful, rejecting attitude and to begin accepting and loving all of God's people?

The responsibility of individual interpretation is the judicial system that God entrusted to the citizens of his kingdom. That precludes the right that any may claim over your faith. Only in respecting that right given to each of us will we ever come to realize the unity that God created in Christ. He put us in one body. Let us respect it that way.

## Chapter 6

### “YOU ARE MY PEOPLE NOW!”

This will not be another doctrinal discourse. I want to tell you about a man named Earnest Pitre.

Being supported in a mission effort in New Iberia, Louisiana, Lea and I, with our six-weeks-old Sol, moved there in 1951. That was *Cajun Country* in the middle of southern Louisiana. There the descendants of the French Acadians, who were once driven out of Canada, lived. Those unfortunate people had taken refuge in the then worthless marshlands bordering the Atchafalaya Basin. Longfellow popularized their sad story in “Evangeline,” and the Evangeline Oak still stands at nearby St. Martinville.

The genteel and industrious Acadians drained the marshes and developed a prosperous agricultural industry while nurturing their flavorful French-Catholic culture in relative isolation. When we moved there, many of the older people could speak no English. World War II and the development of their rich oil reserves began to change all that.

Soon after we arrived in New Iberia, a second radio station began operation. We managed to get a seven-day per week broadcast in prime time. After some time, I was told of a man in Loreauville nine miles away who was very interested, but I was given no name. On Sunday, September 9, 1953, this man came to our assembly for the first time and was baptized. How could I have known of the traumatic emotions tearing at his heart that day?

Thus I met Earnest Pitre, aged 64, a blacksmith and welder who could neither read nor write. Though he was illiterate, he was intelligent. He had even patented a rotary hoe used in the cultivation of sugar cane, the main crop of the area. No paved road had come to his town until a year or so before.

The influence of the Catholic religion was incredibly strong among the “Cajuns.” When Earnest’s younger brother was christened, the priest mistakenly spelled and pronounced his last name differently. As a result, the brothers went through life with different last names! He was taught from childhood that it was a sin to read the Bible.

Eventually, Mr. Pitre came into conflict with his church. After his wife had left him for another man, he remarried without the approval of his church. He could not tolerate the injustice of his consequent rejection for his marriage. So for years he had listened to various radio broadcasts in search of an answer offering him hope. My lessons seemed to offer the truth this unknown listener sought. As he learned, he began to talk with his wife about their obeying the gospel. She was in agreement; that is, until her children found out about it! Then she became adamant in her opposition. Finally, unable to live with his conscience any longer, he told her he was going to the church to be baptized. She warned him that if he did, she would leave him. He expressed his love for her, and concluded, “Well, then you will just have to leave me!” Knowing nothing of that, little could I have realized what a courageous step he was taking that morning.

To his relief, his wife did not follow through on her threat. However, her children initiated a write-in campaign to the radio station to get me off the air, but the station manager stood by me.

After his conversion, he was a happy man, loving all and loved by all. He was at each service, and when greeted with, "Brother Pitre, how are you?" he would always reply, "Lovely, just lovely!"

His new-found relationship offered so much joy that he was eager to share the gospel with family and friends. But to his dismay, one by one they distanced themselves from him.

Now that he was no longer afraid of the Bible, he had another dream. He wanted to learn to read it for himself. But his age and poor eyesight made that seem but a dream.

This was before the time of cassette recordings, but I purchased for him a record player and the recorded New Testament scriptures. He was in heaven! To say that he played them over and over does not tell the story. He lived with the scriptures. Also, by obtaining an extra-large print New Testament, he was then able to find corresponding places in the scriptures and the record and follow along. In his devotion to this learning experience, he wore out the set of records so that they had to be replaced. He almost memorized the entire Book. Maybe it was more the memorization than actual reading, but he taught himself to read the Bible.

By the time he had learned to read, I had gotten a tape recorder for my broadcasting use. So I invited him to come to our home to read some for recording. It was a proud moment for him and a touching one for Lea and me to hear him read in his strong Cajun accent, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit," and other passages as well. Here was an illiterate man with failing eyesight approaching the age of seventy who had taught himself to read the Bible!

His continued rejection by his former church, family, and friends prepared him for another painfully emotional experience which led him to an enriching realization.

A grandson of Brother Pitre was killed in an auto accident. A half dozen of us went to Jeanerette for the funeral. We took our seats about midway in the building of the Catholic Church. Then came the procession with the body followed by the family, as their custom was. As Brother Pitre entered with the family, he immediately turned to the back wall and stood with a forlorn look of dejection that tore at the heart. He no longer belonged with his family, his church, his people, his culture. There he stood in loneliness and rejection.

As soon as the family was seated, I arose and went back to him. When he saw me, it was as though his spirit had returned to his body. He came and sat with us, and then stood with us for the final ritual in the churchyard cemetery. None of our group had spoken a word. Then as the crowd was dismissed, he turned to us and said simply, "You are my people now."

What a profound expression of the real meaning of the fellowship of the community of Christ! Earnest Pitre has been gone many years. Louisiana has changed. The Catholic Church has changed. I have changed. But the need for acceptance has not changed.

May we never let age, or fears, or costs, or pressures, or hindrances stop us from learning and growing. And out of all the wounds and rejections of life resulting from misunderstandings, prejudices, or arrogance, let us accept, and find acceptance with, all of God's community of believers. Then in God's support group, let us treasure on another, saying simply, "You are my people now!"

## Chapter 7

### **SERVING “OTHERWISE THAN AS PRESCRIBED”**

When the twenty-five year old Hezekiah came to the throne in Judah, the house of the Lord was closed, defiled, and in disrepair; the priesthood was no longer sanctified; the ceremonies of the Law had been abandoned; and the kingdom had long been divided. This youthful king ordered a restoration of the house of God and an observance of the Passover. Then he sent an invitation to the remnant of the divided brethren.

In making their plans for the Passover, some technical problems came to light. Because the priests could not consecrate themselves properly in time for the lawfully prescribed fourteenth day of Abib, they set a date in the second month. And “a multitude of the people, many of them from Ephraim, Manasseh, Issachar, and Zebulun, had not cleansed themselves, yet they ate the Passover otherwise than as prescribed” (2 Chron. 30).

How could they have dared to disregard God’s laws in such a bold manner! Did God respond to their presumption with some awesome vengeance?

They had acted neither presumptuously nor in disregard to God’s laws. Prior to the Passover, “Hezekiah had prayed for them, saying, ‘The good Lord pardon every one who sets his heart to seek God, the Lord the God of his fathers, even though not according to the sanctuary’s rules of cleanness.’ And the Lord heard Hezekiah, and healed the people” (v. 1820). Even though they respected God’s code of law given through Moses, they were made to recognize that there are overriding principles which can make arbitrary law flexible.

The enjoining of the Sabbath rest was an arbitrary law deriving from the authority of God, for example, yet Jesus commended their showing mercy to an unfortunate animal on the Sabbath even though it involved labor on the Sabbath.

From this incident relating to Hezekiah and the Passover, we can learn that God is more concerned about “everyone who sets his heart to seek God” than about lawful details through which he is sought. This points to a principle that is greater than the law intended to promote it. God is more concerned with man than with law. Whatever laws and regulations are given are intended to aid man in finding and worshiping God rather than hindering. God loves man more than his law. “The Sabbath was made for man,” Jesus explained, “and not man for the Sabbath.” The law was made for the good of man, but man was not made to conform to arbitrary laws. In the instance under study, the keeping of the regulations which were meant to encourage worshipful expressions of the heart would have prevented that very worship.

If this principle prevailed under the legal code of Moses, how much happier it is with us since we are justified through the principle of grace through faith instead of lawful rituals.

You may protest that they received a special dispensation from God through a direct answer to Hezekiah’s prayer; that we do not receive such communications today; therefore, we must not trifle with God’s laws. We are not suggesting that we trifle with his message, but we are

emphasizing the discernment of the principles that govern God's dealing with us. We do not hear voices like Hezekiah might have heard, but we can learn of God's dealing through the Old Testament scriptures. Paul told Timothy that the writings could make him wise unto salvation. Can we not also discern that wisdom?

Accepting the principle of this text, we can believe that God excuses circumstantial inadequacies such as ignorance when one sets his or her heart to seek him. That's good news for me, and it should be to you, for no one can know and understand all of God's message perfectly. The person who may think he masters all does not even recognize his own ignorance.

Through the centuries, the men of greatest mind and sincerest dedication have not come to common understanding of such basic matters as the triune divinity, the nature of Christ, the nature of the kingdom, justification, predestination, election, the communion, baptism, the work of the Holy Spirit, the return of Jesus, and countless other fundamental subjects. Yet they set their hearts to seek God.

Which is more important, legal correctness or the proper heart? Do you say that both are necessary? We need not strive for legal correctness because we are not serving under a legal system. The demand for complete knowledge and detailed observances is the breeding ground for endless divisions.

If Jesus gave us a set of lawful details concerning the Lord's supper, for instance, involving a proper time, one cup or multiple cups, wine or grape juice only, leavened or unleavened bread, etc., we would be obligated to observe them accurately in order to be "well-pleasing in Thy sight." But whom could we trust to have all the right answers? And would confusion about any detail of such a pattern prevent one from properly remembering the atonement? Those with various scruples about these things have set their hearts to seek God and they serve to the best of their understanding. That is as much as any of us can do. This same application can be made widely to the things we fail to agree upon, or even agree upon in our misunderstanding.

The purpose of the Passover was not to test Israel's ability to keep rituals in detail, but it was to remind them that God called and delivered them. In like manner, the Lord's supper is not a ritual established to test our ability to understand and keep detailed specifications, but it is to call to our remembrance regularly the very basis of our salvation in Christ. The principle overshadows any confusion about the details.

We err when we try to limit God's grace or demand that he dispense it through law.

This essay is not intended to give license to anyone for willful omission, rebellious disregard, or deliberate change of any instruction God has given us. We do insist, however, that God meets man in his circumstance when he sets his heart to seek his Creator and will accept him out of love instead of out of the person's ability to know, understand, and perform proper rituals, even when "otherwise than as prescribed."

## Chapter 8

### DOES *BAPTIZE* REALLY MEAN TO *IMMERSE* ?

What? Another hassle about immersion? Perhaps you have studied about baptism enough and are not ready to change your fixed convictions about it. You already know that *baptize* means to *immerse*. So what's the problem? Let's take a look.

Words evolve. The current usage of a term may not convey the thought of the original word from which it developed. To ascertain the present-day sense of words, we go back to their root meanings, a sort of discovering their roots. We have done this in regard to baptism. But do we follow this procedure consistently with other words? Let us do a little exercise here to test our intellectual honesty.

Baptism and baptize come from the Greek root *bapto* which means to *dip*. So, that real meaning is undeniable by anyone who respects the authority of the Lord expressed in the Scriptures. Or is it?

We are instructed to "Abhor that which is evil" (Rom. 12:9). Abhor is a translation of the Greek word *apostugeo* which means to *shudder*. Then should it not have been translated *shudder* instead of *abhor*? Who dares to change the prescribed form of expressing detestation of evil? If we go back to the root meaning, shuddering becomes essential in obeying God. Yet, I have never shuddered at evil. Woe is me!

Our translators have rendered *oikodomeo* as *edify*. But the root meaning is to *build a house*. Disciples are taught to edify each other (1 Thes. 5:11; 1 Cor. 14:26). Efforts are made to obey this through teaching and encouraging, but who ever built a house by teaching and encouraging? Who has the authority to change the prescribed procedure?

We all must worship God. Agreed. In many passages the word *worship* is rendered from *proskuneo* whose root meaning is to *kiss toward*. Thus the root word specifies the essential form of our approach to God as kissing toward God. Do you kiss toward God, or do you substitute some other method in your effort to worship him?

These three examples of root meanings are enough to make the point. You may check these words out in *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, by W.E. Vine.

If you are still with me, you are probably wishing to remind me that the current meanings of these words are adapted from the root words rather than being literal translations. Agreed! Except for one of the words!

The etymology of these words had already evolved by the time the New Testament Scriptures were written. We can agree readily that a strong detestation of evil is what God wants rather than a literal bodily shudder. And we can understand that building each other up by teaching and encouragement is a modification of the idea of building a literal structure. Also, the bowing and kissing toward a person or object would indicate veneration and love. Veneration and love

expressed to God is worship even though it takes other forms of action. So, the evolved meaning abandons the mode of kissing toward.

When it comes to baptism, however, we have clung to the original root connotation of dipping and have resisted modification of the meaning of the word. The literal form has been kept sacred so that the meaning must always be *to dip*. On the other hand, we have accepted some adaptation. *To dip* more literally means *to put a vessel into a liquid in order to lift some out*. We have accepted a modification to make it mean *to plunge, immerse, or submerge*. But those are literal meanings. Does baptism have only a literal meaning of dipping, or could it be that time and usage had developed another more general connotation? Let us now consider evidence that both the form of the ritual and the meaning of it had already changed when John, Jesus, and the apostles came on the scene.

### **A Pouring Out**

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 or 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).

The pouring out of the Spirit spoken of by Joel was identified by Peter as the outpouring, falling, or baptism (See Joel 2:28; Acts 10:44f; 11:15-17). Paul speaks of Israel’s being under the cloud while passing through the parted waters of the sea as a baptism (1 Cor. 10:1f). Again, Paul speaks of “the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior” (Titus 3:5f; compare Eph.5:26; 1 Cor. 6:11; Heb. 10:22) Saul’s baptism involved a washing (Acts 22:16; Lk. 11:38). So are we not forced to conclude that Biblical usage reveals prior evolution of the original meaning of *bapto*?

Following our hermeneutic of approved example, or any other hermeneutic, from the above considerations, are we not authorized to define baptism as pouring, sprinkling, washing, or anointing as well as dipping? 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.

There is no definitive example of immersion in the Scriptures. In the case of the Ethiopian eunuch, the going into and coming out of water were not a part of the baptism. Whatever baptism is, it was performed between the going into and coming out of the water. Let us suppose that baptize meant *to wash one’s wounds*. It would then read that they both went into the water, both Philip and the eunuch, and he washed his wounds, and they came up out of the water. Would that exemplify immersion? Unless baptize meant immersion only, the baptism of the Ethiopian could not be an unquestioned example of dipping. Philip went into and came out of the water also, but he was neither baptized nor partially baptized. While I may assume that the Ethiopian was immersed, the text does not prove it.

When we were baptized into Christ and his death, “we were buried therefore with him by baptism into death” (Rom. 6:34; Col. 2:11f). That passage does not picture burial in water. In baptism we are buried with Christ in his tomb rather than Jesus being buried with us in water. Whatever baptism is, in it we are buried symbolically with Jesus in his tomb nineteen centuries ago. Again, I may assume that Paul refers to our immersion, but it is not proven. We are to be crucified, buried, and raised with Christ in obeying the gospel. It is *with* Christ symbolically, not *like* Christ literally in his water baptism. Why accept a figurative crucifixion and resurrection and demand a literal burial?

*Baptismos*, denoting a ceremonial washing of articles, is given that meaning in Mark 7:4 and Hebrews 9:10. In Hebrews 6:2 it is variously translated *baptisms* (KJV); *baptisms*, or *washings* (ASV); *ablutions* (RSV); and *cleansing rites* (NEB). These uses and renderings definitely indicate a variation from the meaning of the root word *bapto*. So much for the form; now let us consider the meaning.

### **The Meaning**

When John came preaching baptism, he did not have to explain it as though it were a new thing. It was already practiced among the Jews. Throughout their history, circumcision was a mark of identification of a Jew. When a Gentile would convert to Judaism, the proselyte not only accepted that fleshly identifying mark, but in later times, he was also baptized as a public expression of initiation and commitment. Leroy Garrett wisely reasons that the Jews understood the meaning of baptism to be *initiation*. Please read his convincing presentation in Chapter 37 of my edited book, *Our Heritage Of Unity And Fellowship*.

John was calling for a change of life and a public expression of commitment to the approaching Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus demonstrated his allegiance also by submitting to that ceremony. The meaning of the ritual was understood as an initiation into the family of Israel and a commitment of citizenship. The concept was not so much that a person obeyed a ritual of dipping as that one had submitted to a ceremony expressing allegiance, acceptance, and dedication.

Evidently, Nicodemus, as a circumcised and committed Jew, thought he would have ready acceptance in Christ’s kingdom on those grounds. Jesus informed him in veiled language that he would have to be born into his kingdom. That would require a new circumcision symbolized by baptism (Col. 2:11f). And his commitment and initiation as a proselyte into this new kingdom would be expressed in a public ceremony called baptism. Assuming that the ritual involved immersion, the core meaning of it was not *to become dipped* but *to be initiated and express commitment*.

When Jesus asked James and John if they would be able to be baptized with the baptism with which he was to be baptized, he was asking about their commitment to be crucified with him (See Lk. 12:50; Mk. 10:38f; Matt. 20:22f) rather than a willingness to undergo some ritual of immersion.

When the Pharisees rejected the purpose of God, having not been baptized of John, they were not rejecting the form of a ritual, but they were refusing acceptance of the kingdom John was proclaiming. The person who is sprinkled today considers his initiation important rather than the form of the rite by which he declared it.

To make Ephesians 4:5 read “There is one immersion” would be to miss the meaning that Paul was expressing that there is only one initiation into Christ’s community for all people.

Concluding, even if we admit that John, Jesus, and the apostles immersed believers, there is no clear example of their doing so. We cannot deny that the evolution of language allowed inspired writers to speak of the form of baptism as also including pouring, dispersing upon, washing, and anointing. The rite necessarily took a form, but without emphasis of the form, they looked upon baptism as a public initiation and commitment.

By this essay, I am not urging anyone to be sprinkled. I was immersed and would advise all believers to follow that undeniably safe course. My aim is to encourage you to become less condemning of the majority of Christ’s followers who accept a ritual of initiation without emphasis upon the form it takes. They feel as scripturally sound as you or I do.

With my background and strong conditioning, it has been very difficult for me to reach this conclusion. But I must accept other disciples and let God do the judging.

## Chapter 9

### OUR RELATIONSHIP THROUGH BAPTISM

Please stay with me through one more discussion of baptism. This can be a profitable exercise because so many partisan viewpoints have confused us in our search for truth.

On one extreme, baptism is viewed as a necessary sacrament through which life is given to the sinner, while at the other extreme, it is looked upon as a nonessential rite which is often spoken of with disdain. The first concept developed through legalistic interpretation of the will of God. Reformers, reacting against any idea of necessary works of law or merit, attributed justification to faith apart of any acts of acceptance, thus developing the latter belief. With no middle ground of agreement, the polarized dogmas developed.

As I have expressed in my books, I consider that the scriptures present a balance between those extremes. Life begins when one is begotten by the gospel through faith, and baptism confirms and transposes that life rather than giving it. Although life begins at conception, it cannot continue without a birth. Just as birth initiates life into a different stage of development, so baptism becomes an essential initiation into fuller life. It is an entrance into a spiritual relationship with God and all of his redeemed. If a believer refuses the initiation, he is refusing the fellowship.

In saving man, God uses faith to change the heart, repentance to change the life, and baptism to change the state or relationship.

After reading the preceding chapter concerning immersion, Col. Ray Willcox, a friend who is an elder stationed at Shalimar, Florida, wrote offering some good insights. He commented, "I reasoned (based in large part on having become freer, if not free in Christ) that it is the heart/attitude/motivation of the candidate undergoing baptism that is of prime importance rather than the rite itself." Then he adds, "So what is the *benefit* of baptism? Well, I'm obviously out into the shallow water of human reasoning, but the main benefit is that finite man operating in finite space and time can participate in a *rite of initiation* that signifies in physical terms a spiritual transaction that is infinite. In other words, I can put a mark on the calendar and say, 'That's when I became a child of God.' It gives me physical symbols that represent spiritual realities. And since I cannot see spiritual realities, I need the symbols."

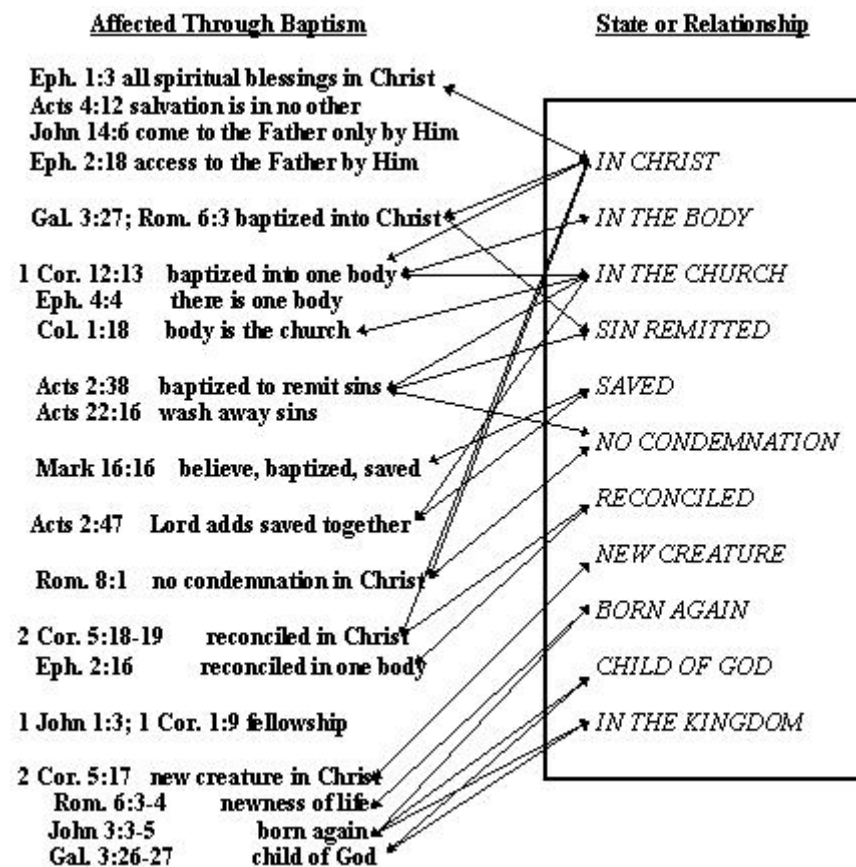
While we deny that baptism has saving powers, we do not deny the need for the ritual. We are not inclined to limit God's extension of grace. He can save whomever he wishes, including the pagan who has the law written on his heart and the pious unimmersed who are innocently uninformed. He may accept the newly begotten learner in the earliest stage of belief, if he so wills. But as the disciple learns of Christ's desire for him to be baptized, if he refuses to comply, he will cease to have the heart of a true disciple. Even though I do not begrudge that God may give special dispensations of his grace, I must teach the message that is meant for all learners. In being true to my calling, I must teach you to comply with the plainer, general rule rather than relying upon the more vague exception.

Although many of us of the Stone-Campbell heritage have held an extreme position on baptism, others of us have been calling disciples in all the churches back to a scriptural balance. Our aim has been to show that the salvation by grace through faith is accepted and appropriated by obedience to the gospel which includes baptism. In this symbolic ceremony one identifies with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection, which is the basis of our salvation.

For the remainder of this discussion, I will use a lesson that I have presented many times through the years with the aid of a chart which is duplicated in part here. Please note the expressions listed and encircled: *IN CHRIST, IN THE BODY, IN THE CHURCH, SINS REMITTED, SAVED, NO CONDEMNATION, RECONCILED, NEW CREATURE, BORN AGAIN, CHILD OF GOD, IN THE KINGDOM*. Beside these terms are listed scripture references with connecting lines between each reference and the expressions that relate to it.

Even though all of those terms are not synonymous, each of them relates to the disciple's state or relationship. To enjoy one of those relationships is to enjoy them all! To illustrate, to be in Christ is the same as to be in the body, in the church, etc. on down the list.

To be in God's favor means to be in the proper state, or relationship with him. By sin we become separated from God (Isa. 59:2). How may this fellowship with him be restored?



We are accepted in Christ, the source of all spiritual blessings (Eph. 1:3). Salvation is in no other (Acts 4:12), for no one comes to the Father but by him (John 14:6), and our access to the Father is through him (Eph. 2:18). (For the sake of brevity, I will not give full quotations. You are invited to read these references giving study to their interrelation.)

Belief does not establish that relationship in Christ without baptism, "for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:26f; See Rom. 6:3f).

In being baptized into Christ, we are baptized into the one body, which is the church (1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 4:4; Col. 1:18). So you cannot have fellowship with Christ, the source of all spiritual blessings, without also being in his spiritual body, which is the church (the universal congregation, assembly).

One of the purposes for baptism is for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38; 22:16). Jesus promised that those who believe and are baptized will be saved (Mark 16:16). So we are forgiven, or saved, by the same process that establishes our relationship in Christ in his church.

Out of Christ, one is still condemned, but for those who have been baptized into Christ for the remission of sins, there is no condemnation (Rom. 8:1). In taking away our sins, our alienation is no more. We are reconciled to God in Christ (2 Cor. 5:18f). That reconciliation is in one body (Eph. 2:6). And that body is the church. All the reconciled are in the church. The church does not save, but it is the saved, for the same procedure that saves us puts us into his saved group.

Being reconciled to God, we are in fellowship with him. That fellowship with God is shared with all whom he has forgiven.

We are baptized into Christ, and “if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). Each new creation/creature received this newness of life upon arising from baptism (Rom. 6:3f). A person in newness of life is the one born of the water and the Spirit (John 3:35). In this rebirth of the water and the Spirit one becomes a child of God entering the Kingdom of God (See Gal. 3:26f again).

Now, please answer these questions for yourself. Are we saved by faith apart from any action on our part? Are we saved by praying? Are we saved apart from the church? Will meeting Bible requirements put one into a sectarian group? Will meeting manmade requirements put one into the Lord’s church? Does God add the saved person to the church of his choice? Do the saved have an option about being in the Lord’s church?

After reading and relating each of these references, can you deny the importance of baptism? *Without baptism to change his state or relationship, can you honestly declare that one is in Christ, in the body, in the church, in remission of sins, saved, free from condemnation, reconciled, a new creature, born again, a child of God, and in the kingdom of God?* These references give God’s answer!

If you were hopelessly in need and someone gave you a check that could pay your every debt, would it do you any good if you neither accepted or appropriated it? Would you earn it or deserve it because you accepted it, took it to the bank, cashed it, and appropriated the money? Would you be benefited if you just believed that the check was good but did not accept it?

Baptism is not a work of obedience to law, as though we are under a legal code. It is not a work of merit, as though in baptism we are performing some deed that puts God in our debt. It is an expression of our faith in accepting the blessings offered by God through the gospel. No gift benefits unless it is accepted and appropriated. God’s grace is in vain for the person who is unwilling to receive it on the terms offered.

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Having come into fellowship with God by our having accepted his grace through faith, “let us leave the elementary doctrines of Christ and go on to maturity...” (Heb. 6:1).

## Chapter 10

### THOSE GOSPEL MEETINGS

If you were converted thirty-five or more years ago, chances are that you “responded to the invitation” during a gospel meeting. During my childhood and the greater part of my life in the Church of Christ, the gospel meeting was a tried and true method of evangelism. Most of the additions were in response to the convincing messages of an imported preacher and the arousing invitation songs at those exciting gatherings.

That eagerly awaited annual effort was the highlight of the year. Before the days of air conditioning and buildings large enough to accommodate the crowds, the services were conducted outdoors where I grew up in West Texas. Through the years the duration of those efforts has shrunken from two or three weeks to two or three days, or none at all.

Other churches had *revival meetings*; we had *gospel meetings*! You do not read of revivals in the Scriptures, but you read about the gospel. Never mind that *gospel* was never used to describe a meeting. Never mind that the very persons we hoped to attract understood what a revival meeting was but might be unclear about a gospel meeting. But we gained a satisfaction in splitting that hair.

In the preceding remarks, I wrote of *gospel* meetings with supposedly evangelistic purposes. As I think back now, I question our understanding then of what gospel preaching and evangelism were. The Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ was like the third stanza of the songs which is often skipped over. The gospel gave way to doctrinal disputes and hobby-riding in our effort to convert the Baptists and Methodists to a different set of doctrines of our exclusive brand.

One night of each series was always devoted toward convicting others that instrumental music in worship would send them to hell.

It seemed of vast importance that the sinner be convinced that the church began on Pentecost, not before or after. Jesus was necessarily mentioned, but the highlight was on the church. Sometimes, to head off premillennial thinking, a sermon labored to show the identity of the church with the kingdom, both being started on Pentecost, and both being the Church of Christ rather than the Baptist Church, the Methodist Church, or any other. Most of the preachers denounced other churches by name, often in scorn and contempt and with arrogant challenges.

There always had to be a lesson on the identity of the church-its founder, time of beginning, terms of entrance, worship, work, organization, name, etc. showing that those marks identified our segment of the Church of Christ as the true church. Jesus got passing mention in contrast to Joseph Smith, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and other such “false” teachers. Those lessons made it seem that salvation was dependent more in being in the rightly patterned organization than in a personal relationship with God in Christ.

I can still visualize those blackboard diagrams, which I also used for many years, depicting our concept of the original church, the foretold apostasy (obliteration of the church), the misguided efforts of the Reformation, and our restoration of the one true church. Of course, our segment of the splintered Restoration Movement was it!

No gospel meeting would have been complete without at least one effort to convince the sinner that faith was not enough to save him but the declaration that works of obedience, primarily the five steps, was the gospel bringing salvation. The saving faith was made to be more a faith in right works than belief in Jesus as the Lord to whom one surrendered his life.

Our religious neighbors testified to having had saving experiences and the Pentecostals claimed gifts of the Spirit. This made it imperative that one lesson be given in ridicule of those claims and to convince all that the Holy Spirit completed his work nineteen centuries ago and left us the New Testament scriptures, and that through that word alone he touches our lives and is in us, his temples.

Regardless of its subject, in each lesson baptism was emphasized. But that was not enough. One session had to be devoted to baptism to make sure that all listeners knew the purpose and mode of baptism and who were candidates for it, and to know their previous baptism was not to be trusted.

In most any discourse on any subject there were places where the insert key could be tapped to bring in points about baptism, faith only, instrumental music, or whatever the preacher was contentious about. He could inject these points selectively depending on who was in the audience.

Thinking back on the history of our rural congregation, I recall about a dozen men from it who became preachers or missionaries and half that number of women who married preachers or missionaries. I was among those who grew up under that sort of tutelage. We carried those unbalanced, misguided concepts into our various ministries. The lessons given in those meetings were the model for those delivered from the pulpit the rest of the time. We were all caught up in the reactionary preaching of our first decades of existence as a separate body. Fighting for our identity as a separatist group, we unwittingly turned the gospel of salvation into doctrinal disputes concerning the church.

It is with dismay that I recall having accepted that sort of format for my efforts. I had been taught it by the sincerest servants of God whose honorable names many of you would recognize, and its pattern had been imprinted in me almost indelibly. My painful review of these things here is not out of bitterness or to belittle God's servants. I would have us to see more clearly how our wrong emphasis laid a foundation for an exclusive group which depends more on right forms, doctrines, patterns and procedures than upon a personal belief in Jesus and a living relationship with him by faith. Such preaching reinforced our convictions of exclusiveness from all other Christian groups including the various splinter groups of the Church of Christ.

Perhaps you are protesting in your mind that we cannot have Christ apart from his church. You are correct in that, but being in the church is a result of accepting salvation in Christ. Salvation

does not come from finding the *right church*. God adds the saved to it without their search for it. The Lord does not add all the saved to an exclusive, organized group. *We must not proclaim such a group as an element of the gospel of salvation!*

Those gospel meetings were not entirely devoid of the gospel. They were unbalanced. That is my point here. It was, and continues to be, a matter of misplaced emphasis. I am pleased that many in this generation are recognizing that problem. The church in change is correcting that misdirection.

## Chapter 11

### A PRELUDE TO WORSHIP

You go to the usual Sunday assembly. The usual speaker arises to give the usual welcome. But what he says this time is very unusual. He begins: “We welcome you into this gathering of disciples to up-build each other and to offer formal worship to God. There is one qualification, however, to this welcome. If you can think of anyone, whether it be your neighbor, business associate, wife, child, parent, or anyone else, who holds any just grievance against you which you have not resolved, you are urged to leave this assembly immediately and make right the wrong you have done. Then please return to participate with us.” You cannot believe what you just heard!

How would you react to that? Would you be embarrassed, or even infuriated, or would you humbly examine yourself in penitence which demands corrective action?

Jesus was talking to people who worshipped God through Mosaic rituals when he issued this startling announcement: “So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5:23f). That is awesome! It should get our attention. It bears repeating regularly as a prelude to worship.

In our efforts to make our assemblies God-centered, we have emphasized the keeping of rituals with hairsplitting correctness. Such scrupulous detail might be observed, however, by a worshipper in the same assembly with someone whom he has treated unjustly. He might try to bind the strictest of scruples concerning performance of details while offending others in the process. He may attack and reject brothers in Christ who disagree with him. Do you have the audacity to worship our Father while denying that others of his children are your brothers! A judgmental, sectarian spirit is a sin against our fellow disciples. The rejected brother has aught against you! Is God so pleased with your rituals of worship that he will overlook your divisive spirit?

Jesus said our religion must first be man-centered! John would shame us who think we can love God whom we have not seen while failing to love our present brother.

Just who are those brothers who have something against you? It may be the wife or husband who is suffering from your abusive language or mistreatment, or whom you have lied to, deceived, or betrayed. What of the child who has been scolded, abused, or left without child support? It includes the person whom you scorned, reviled, cursed, stole from, lied to, defrauded, or slandered. Also, there is the long list of Christians in other churches whom you have sought to exclude from the kingdom of God.

Looming high as a barricade to your acceptable worship is the lack of forgiveness of the person whose pleas for pardon you have disdained. “If you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt. 6:12-15). “First go and be reconciled!” Jesus demands.

The prelude to worship is not a musical rendition; it is a clearing of conscience.

God dealt with Israel's similar misdirection. The impressive God-centered, God-ordained rituals of worship in Micah's time could not mask their lack of love for one another. Micah cried out, "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:68). What a farce it is for unloving, unjust, proud people to perform religious rituals as a claim to righteousness!

Jesus was talking about just grievances, not groundless complaints. Some persons will not be reconciled, and some wrongs cannot be corrected, but we must do what we can to bring about peace. "If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all" (Rom.12:18). But efforts of reconciliation must come before worship. Heeding Jesus' exhortation to be peacemakers would erase the shame of hypocrisy in worship, eliminate the sin of division, and create a true sense of fellowship with man and God.

We have been referring to the prelude to ritualistic worship as prevailed under the Law of Moses. Our worship is not limited to formal exercises. Since we are called upon to give ourselves as living sacrifices, your entire life is a worship, a service, an offering. So, each day and at all times, you must be right with your fellowman.

Our justice, mercy, and humility are not only a required prelude to formal worship but also to a righteous life. God sees our righteousness of heart in our loving behavior rather than through our repetition of meticulous ritualistic details of formal worship.

Formal expression of worship is an outgrowth of the righteous heart rather than the means of gaining it. The cleansing of the heart is a necessary prelude to worship.

## Chapter 12

### WORSHIPPING “IN SPIRIT AND TRUTH”

Jesus informed the Samaritan woman that God wants mankind to worship him “in spirit and truth.” What does that mean?

In our search for a clear understanding of what Jesus said, let us consider the setting again. The context is John 4. In Jesus’ encounter with the woman at the well, the old question surfaced as to which worship was authentic, that of the Jews or Samaritans.

Who were these Samaritans? After Jeroboam divided the kingdom, Samaria became the capital of the Kingdom of Israel which consisted of ten tribes of Israel. Through succeeding generations, the people became increasingly idolatrous and corrupt. In 722 B.C. God allowed Shalmaneser, King of Assyria, to capture them and take the people away into captivity. He repopulated the land with Assyrians. Because these new inhabitants were ravaged by wild beasts, they assumed that they had offended the god of the land. So a captive priest was sent to teach “how they should fear the Lord.” Thus, along with their own gods, they also feared God and were instructed from the Pentateuch.

Generations later, as Judah returned from captivity and began to rebuild the temple, the Samaritans wanted to help. Their help was refused. That further inflamed long-felt animosities. A man named Manasseh, of priestly lineage in Judah, married a Samaritan and was expelled by Nehemiah about 432 B.C. He went to Samaria and became high priest of a temple built on Mt. Gerizim and there the Samaritans offered sacrifices of the Law. In their nationalistic zeal they claimed that both their temple and their copy of the Law were greater than those at Jerusalem. On the other hand, Jewish animosity was so entrenched that a traveler went around Samaria on his journey from Judea to Galilee.

Presumably authorized by the Law, two mutually exclusive religions centered on Mt. Zion in Jerusalem and Mt. Gerizim in Samaria, only a few miles apart. Sounds modern, doesn’t it? In their attempts to keep the rituals of Moses, the Jews and Samaritans differed. The Samaritan woman was eager to learn which side was right. So, as soon as she became convinced that Jesus was a prophet, she put that question to him. Although Jesus assured her that salvation was of the Jews, he did not let their dispute be the issue.

As related by John, “The woman said to him, ‘Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth’” (John 4:19-24).

Jesus gave that sinful woman a startling revelation. The time had come, he told her, when worship would be centered in neither of those localities, but true worshipers would worship in spirit and truth. But what does it mean to worship in spirit and truth?

The most common attempt to answer this question reveals our sad misdirection in legalism, patternism, and ritualism. It urges that we must worship according to truth; that is, we must be cautious to discern and keep the specific details and pattern of each of the ritualistic “five acts of worship” in weekly assemblies. And we must go through these forms with meditation, mood, and feeling (though not exhibited too exuberantly!) that supposedly lifts them above mere rituals. It becomes ritual and emotion by command and demand.

In each locality they were ritually sacrificing fleshly, earthly offerings that only pictured the truth. They offered the prescribed ritual sacrifices of the Law in order to gain God’s expressed forgiveness, but these things could only depict in type and shadow what would be fulfilled in Christ. Although truth from the Books of Moses was involved in guiding their actions, they were not worshipping in truth. Whatever thing was offered, it only anticipated fulfillment in Christ who is the true Passover lamb, sin offering, scapegoat, first-fruits, etc. depicted in their symbolic ceremonies.

In contrast to God sending a code of law, “grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” He was “full of grace and truth.” He is the Truth, the fulfillment of the rituals and shadows, the forms and types, through which both Jew and Samaritan sought to approach God. Happily, our approach to God in relationship and worship is in Him, the Truth, not through another law but a Person.

God, being spirit, is not localized in manmade temples, and his worship is spiritual communion rather than ritual, in the heart rather than from a literal altar. No longer would the Temple visit bring the disciple into the Presence, for he is a temple himself with the Spirit of God within him. The Temple priest is superseded by the priesthood of the believer. The truth has fulfilled all that foreshadowed it.

Now, Jesus was affirming, acceptable worship no longer depends upon regulated expressions at certain places or specified times. There are no holy altars, rituals, and sacraments but sanctified persons who are temples of his Spirit and whose hearts are holy altars offering continual sacrifice. Our worship/praise is thought, lived, spoken, and sung as a response to our consciousness of God’s infinite qualities, his indwelling, and his love. We exchanged symbolic rituals for a whole-life spiritual relationship in which we seek to honor him in every thought and action. We worship him in truth and in spirit, that is, truly and spiritually, through the dedication of our inner selves to God in Christ.

Jesus was not pointing the Samaritan woman to assemblies and “five acts of worship,” another system regulated by law like the one her question was about. He did not bring us into bondage to another set of demanded rituals, but he liberated our spirits to serve and praise in his presence at all times and in every place.

Our temple fires never go out.

## Chapter 13

### THE FORBIDDEN PRAYER

When his disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he recited to them a brief prayer which is used universally by Christians and is called *The Lord's Prayer*. In the Church of Christ generally, however, we have been turned away from using that prayer. Because of our aversion to that petition, I suspect that most of us would have difficulty in repeating it from memory.

Two objections have been put forth in our effort to prohibit the use of Jesus' prescribed model: (1) we cannot rightly pray "Thy kingdom come" because the kingdom came on Pentecost and we are in it, and (2) it is not prayed "in Jesus' name" as Jesus later taught us to pray. Let us question the validity of each of those objections.

From reading the gospels, we learn that the disciples looked for an earthly restoration of the national kingdom of Israel throughout his ministry and also after the resurrection of Jesus. Even though the misunderstanding disciples evidently prayed for a national kingdom, God did not reject their prayers. He established his spiritual kingdom anyway. In view of their willingness to let God's will be done in their lives, God accepted their petitions. We can gain confidence that he will also hear our prayers even when we do not fully understand that for which we ask.

Because we have been inclined to limit the identity of the kingdom to the church on earth, we have failed to appreciate the broader concept of the kingdom. The kingdom of God will come in its completeness only in the next world. Evidently, Jesus was teaching his disciples to pray that the kingdom would be established and also attain its fullness or maturity which will be accomplished only when it is delivered up to the Father.

In poetic fashion the Jews used many parallelisms where a thought is repeated in slightly different words. Jesus used this literary device when he said, "Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done." Those statements mean the same thing essentially. And both clauses are modified by "on earth as it is in heaven."

The kingdom of God is the ruling of God in the hearts of his people. When his will is being done, God is ruling. The purpose of God is never done fully on earth, but in heaven his reign is perfected. On earth we still have sin, sorrow, pain, and death because the will of God is not accomplished in its fullness here, but those things do not prevail in heaven. It should be our constant prayer that we grow toward that mature state on earth. In our individual efforts to let him rule, we ask for our daily sustenance, forgiveness of sins, and God's help in withstanding temptation.

In consideration of this desire to allow God to reign, should we not pray, "Thy kingdom come"? This, by the way, in no way supports the concept of a premillennial reign of Christ on earth for which many sincere disciples pray.

Now let us consider the matter of praying "in Jesus' name."

“Whatever you ask *in my name*, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son; if you ask anything *in my name*, I will do it” (John 14:13f). Other passages also emphasize that promise of Jesus. What does that mean? Is this some sort of password without which our prayers never reach the Father? Is it a part of a formula for a ritual of prayer?

*In the name of* someone means *by the authority of* or *in behalf of* the person whose name is used. Jesus has mediated the way back to the Father so that when we are in him, there is no longer an alienation. Coming by the authorization of Jesus we have direct access to the Father. In Christ we are also in the Father and his Spirit is in us in a reconciled state. Our whole life is given to the Father in his name!

*In his name* — by his authorization and in his behalf — we baptize (Acts 2:38), we sing (Eph. 5:18f), we gather (Matt. 18:20), and “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God through him” (Col. 3:17). That is all-inclusive (!) and has nothing to do with saying *in Jesus’ name* at the end of a petition. It means that our whole lives are dedicated to God through him in whom we are now reconciled to the Father. Jesus does not relay our requests to the Father; we now have direct access to him.

If the Lord’s Prayer had been given to us for a rote prayer in a ritual, the wording recorded by Matthew and Luke would necessarily have been identical (Matt. 6:9f; Luke 11:1f). But the prayer can still be offered, even in unison, by thoughtful disciples in a manner far more expressive than a ritual. If we wish to expand our prayer, we can still see in Jesus’ prayer an outline to follow; however, it seems strange to me that he did not include thanksgiving in the prayer.

Simplistic answers most always overlook deeper meanings. Our marking *The Lord’s Prayer* as a prohibited petition has deprived us of some richer spiritual insights.

## Chapter 14

### **“I DIDN’T HEAR NOBODY PRAY!”**

The sad refrain of an old hillbilly song lingers in my memory. The ballad tells of a tragic wreck on the highway, and the lament was, “I didn’t hear nobody pray.” The victims met the trauma with fatalism. It speaks of our inclination, even as believers, to face our most devastating circumstances without asking for divine help.

The assembled body of believers should be “a house of prayer.” Disciples need the help that comes through prayer and the strength that comes from those who pray with them. Assemblies should help to fill our need by congregational support in prayer. Even though we may approach God privately with our urgent requests, we may still feel lonely, forgotten, and ineffective without the intercession of others.

I would like to know that the things I am about to mention do not apply in your congregation. Traditionally, our prayers in assemblies have been impromptu without plan or forethought. Too often, they are repetitious, generalized prayers led by the next person on the rotation list. Because of such ineffectiveness, the disciple with a breaking, burdened heart can leave our services unfulfilled, feeling that “I didn’t hear nobody pray!”

How many of the deep personal, national, and universal concerns are addressed in the prayers in your assemblies? The checklist for petitions usually includes the sick and the afflicted, widows and orphans, those who have lost loved ones, the preacher, and the elders, along with a few variations. Little forethought is discerned in the prayer.

Consequently, a person filled with despairing anxieties, depression, stress, emotional instability, or feelings of helplessness may leave the service feeling that “I didn’t hear nobody pray.”

Do we ever pray for those paralyzed by low self-esteem, the disgraced, the convicted lawbreaker, or those in prison?

If the jobless, those burdened by debt, the destitute, or the homeless were to attend our services, would they even receive any emotional support through our prayers?

A person whose faith is being tried by fire, or is overcome by temptation, or is fighting against overpowering doubts, or is being driven by peer pressure should be able to find strength in our prayer sessions together. But do they?

And what of those who came to the assembly in spite of disheartening marital problems, problems with children, problems with parents, alienations, broken friendships, divorce, and being victims of divorce? As to their needs being presented to the Lord, do they leave thinking, “I didn’t hear nobody pray”?

Do we remember the lonely, those confined at home, those neglected helpless persons, and those in nursing homes? Even though these individuals might have once been very active in the

congregation, when they can no longer attend, we let them fade from our concern as non-persons. Although we may not be able to attend to all their needs, we can remember them in prayer. When I think of these forgotten people, I often recall the line from Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner": "Alone, alone, all, all alone, Alone on a wide, wide sea, And never a saint took pity on my soul in agony!"

Wars rage; thousands die; and injustice deprives and enslaves its victims. Do we pray for peace constantly, or only when our own country is in conflict? Do not the hurting millions in the deprived nations merit our concern and intercession?

The television news brings the horrible picture of the starving around the world. We send some food but cannot feed them all; yet we can pray to the Source of food in their behalf. But do we?

We decry the corruption, greed, oppression, and tyranny of the officials of our country and other nations. But I don't hear anybody pray to God to use and overrule the evil men to bring about good. Prayer for the integrity of those in power is not a priority in our assemblies either.

Our nation is in a snowballing, downhill roll of immorality, vulgarity, obscenity, profanity, pornography, dehumanizing activities, sexual promiscuity (whether by heterosexuals or homosexuals), mockery of God's standards, dope addiction and drug traffic, liquor addiction and its traffic, pleasure addiction, and flaunting of wealth. When was the last time you heard those diseases of decay laid before God in the church gathering? These current local and personal concerns should keep us agonizing in prayer as a body. "But I didn't hear nobody pray!"

It is estimated that about twenty million births have been aborted since the Roe vs. Wade decision of January 22, 1973. That is four thousand per day! But I never hear anybody cry out to God for those helpless victims in our churches!

The believers in Christ are shamefully divided — both those in the Church of Christ and those outside of it. When did you last hear that grave problem mentioned in prayer? I was dropped from the list of those to lead public prayer here. It was later revealed that an elder had my name removed because the last time I led a prayer, I prayed for unity, and that made it sound like we were divided!

The God of the universe has promised sympathetic audience with us who are in Christ. "Ask, and it will be given you!" When we ask for bread, he will not give us a stone; when we ask for fish he will not give us a snake! "You do not have, because you ask not." Our prayers are hindered by lack of faith, lack of concern, and selfishness!

There are two reasons why we do not pray for these needs in our assemblies: those who lead the public prayers do not pray for them in their private prayers, and we do not make our specific needs known to those leading.

When we lead public prayers, let us be so discerning that each person present will feel that intercession was made for him or her by all those present. "I heard somebody — a whole body — pray for me!"

## Chapter 15

### COMMUNION PRAYERS

Be thankful if the prayers in your communion meetings are thoughtful and expressive of the meaning of the Lord's Supper. Many of us do not share that blessing in our home congregations. In my sixty years of participation in the supper, I have found it generally to be an unembellished ritual planned as much for speed and efficiency in serving as for communicating its significance and purpose.

Traditionally, men and boys are chosen to serve the assembly because they are next on the rotation list rather than for their ability to conduct a meaningful service. Comments and prayers tend to be filled with inherited clichés which may express the intent and connotation of the supper only vaguely, if at all. Too many of them leave the impression that we are trying to fulfill a requirement "well-pleasing in Thy sight."

For me to be overly critical of the sincere expressions of worship of others is not becoming. My purpose in this chapter is to be helpful. In lighting my little candle, as it were, let me propose a few suggestions which may give some guidance in making the communion more meaningful.

In my participation when the procedure seems rote, I am not limited by the bareness of the ceremony itself. I can guide my own thoughts far beyond what is expressed in comments and prayers by those serving the congregation. But I could do that alone at home. It is so much more purposeful when our thoughts are fed and stimulated mutually. A deeper meaning is then taken of communing or sharing with others.

Quite often we hear thoughts expressing a perceived requirement of weekly communion in our churches. Locally, however, I cannot recall a lesson from the pulpit or more than passing comment at the table regarding the supper. So I am urging that we teach and train those in our congregations who are to serve, and that we plan the communion on a quarterly or yearly basis.

Being fully aware that I cannot cover the whole subject in this brief treatise, I shall attempt only to state some of the intent and meaning of the supper.

*"Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, 'Take, eat: this is my body'" (Matt. 26:26).* Jesus and the disciples were eating the Passover, an annual memorial of Israel's night of deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Israel ate of the roasted lamb whose blood marked the homes spared from death, they shared the unrisen bread prepared in haste for their journey, and they drank the Passover wine.

This shared meal spoke of their unique community and of the covenant that God had made with them. Annual repetition of the exodus story in the impressive Passover ceremony kept the meanings alive through the centuries. Israel was God's nation.

Christ, our Passover, was offered, and we share in him as his unique spiritual body. The supper is a covenant meal in which we remember his atonement while eating of the sacrificial Lamb

symbolically. In this we remember our escape from death, and we give renewed commitment to his covenant.

*Communion* is not just a religious word applied to this memorial ritual. Communion is sharing, participation in, fellowship, contribution, cooperation, close relationship. The bread pictures his body that was crucified for us through which we were offered up to God. Our eating of it symbolizes our sharing in that body. We are one. There is one bread, one body (1 Cor. 10:14-22). There can be no communion in disunity.

In their participation in the supper according to party loyalties, the Corinthian disciples were eating and drinking in an unworthy manner, guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. They were failing to discern the oneness of the body. *“For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself”* (1 Cor. 11:17-34). While rejecting other disciples, one may partake of a ritual of communion while destroying the meaning of communion. The bread of unity cannot be shared with a judgmental heart.

*“And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you: for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins’”* (Matt. 26:27). Jesus took the wine of the Passover that they were eating to depict the blood of atonement. The blood of the covenant sealed God’s promise.

The life is in the blood. Jesus gave his life for us. Our drinking of the cup symbolizes our continuous sharing of his restored life. We continually commit ourselves to his covenant.

*“This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”* Our observance is not just a memorial of the historical Jesus but it is a repeated recognition of his giving his life for ours. Having died, been buried, and raised with him symbolically in baptism, we identify with him as one. We remember and openly acknowledge that he is our very life, for he took our sins which bring death.

*“For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”* In perpetual evangelism through this ritual, we preach the good news that Christ died for our sins and that the risen savior will come to receive us.

From the Biblical record we learn that throughout history, when people reached an agreement on a matter, it was traditional for the agreeing parties to eat a meal together. It was a covenant meal involving the covenant of salt, eaten before the Lord as a witness. Jesus instituted his covenant meal during the covenant meal of the Passover. The early church considered the love feast, a fellowship-communion-sharing meal, to be an appropriate setting for the Lord’s supper.

Jesus was the fulfillment of the wave offering lifted up to God. Cereal and wine were wave offerings of thanksgiving. The bread and cup which we lift up to God are representative of both the sin offering and that of thanksgiving.

The perpetual, or living, bread of his Presence in the holy place was eaten each week by the priests. To us as priests he is the living bread present in our shared eating.

Eating together declared a unity with those at whose table they ate, whether Israel, demons, or the Lord (1 Cor. 10:14-22).

We eat the bread of unity and drink the wine of forgiveness.

Now I shall compose a few prayers which I think are fitting for the Lord's Supper. You may be able to offer prayers that are more expressive than these. But these are included for any persons who feel inadequate and would welcome my suggestions. I admit that I am inexperienced because preachers are seldom called upon to offer prayers in the Lord's Supper.

### **For The Bread**

Our Father, you loved us enough to give your only Son for us. In happiness today we praise you because we share that love. Jesus died the death we deserved in order that we might live. We praise you for our joyous hope. He broke the hold of death that we might be raised with him. We are assured that he will come back to receive us into glory. Our hearts are awed by your goodness shown to us undeserving sinners. Each day is lived in thanksgiving. With one voice this assembly of your saved ones praises you with gratitude. We thank you for this bread which Jesus chose to call his *body*. We thank you that he chose to call all who share this bread his *body* also. We thank you for the constantly renewed life given us in his body. Thank you that we can be secure in him forever. Amen.

Our Father who is in heaven, we believe you are in heaven and we believe you are present in this very room also at this time. We thank you that your Spirit and the Spirit of Christ are within us at all times. As we are gathered to eat this symbolic meal before you, we recognize the Presence of your Son in the bread we eat. You have glorified us in permitting us to share this bread which he calls his body and to share in his body. Father, you have made us one in you and in him. We praise you for that. Thank you for offering his body for our sins that we might be brought back into your favor. Thank you for this bread which renews our appreciation at this moment for the life which Jesus has given to us. He has paid for our guilt that we might be free from it. Thank you for your limitless love. Amen.

Our Father, living in the fleshly body, we sin because of its power over us. While we were sinners, you sent you son in the flesh that he might overcome sin for us. He never sinned, but he accepted all of our ugliness and alienation as though they were his own. He bore our guilt in his body on the cross. He blotted out all the charges written against each of us, nailing them to the cross. Thus he saved us by breaking down the barrier between you and us, and between fellow members of your body. You made us one in him with yourself. We cannot praise you enough for such a gift. Thank you for this reminder as we share this bread. Thank you that we are reassured of your forgiveness at this moment as each of us eats of this bread. May our grateful thoughts rule our conduct this week. May our every action be motivated by your love. Thank you for accepting us. Amen.

Our Father, we are in awe that your love would reach down to save us in our sinful state. We continue to thank you for Jesus who was crucified because of our sins. He carried our guilt that you might accept us in your holy presence. He has claimed us as members of his body which

was offered. And now we eat this bread as a representation of sharing in his body. We trust that we are perpetually offered to you as acceptable through him. We live because he lives as conqueror of sin and death. In this communion today we confess him again as our savior and we commit ourselves to you in him more firmly. Thank you for this bread and for Christ's presence which we visualize in it. Thank you for bringing us into union with you in him. Amen.

### **For The Cup**

Our Father, our only claim before you is Jesus Christ. He is the only offering who can remove the sin that separates us from you. We thank you that we are cleansed by his blood so that we are at peace in you and can speak with you intimately. Thank you for reaching out to us through him. We praise him because he bore our punishment for sin that we might escape it. We thank you for this cup through which he chose to depict his blood. We drink of it at this time in recognition and praise of him. Amen.

Our God who gives and sustains life, we know that we cannot give or retain life by our own power. We are helpless before both physical and spiritual death. You have given us the grace of life through Jesus' giving of his life for us and to us. You have given us power over physical death through his resurrection. Father, this is beyond our understanding; yet we believe. Our belief is renewed and strengthened today as we drink of this which represents the very life that Jesus gave for us. While sharing this life together, we drink the cup together with deepest gratitude and reverent praise. Amen.

Our God whose promises give us hope, we eat this covenant meal before you today. You have agreed to receive us who believe in your son. You sealed your covenant with his blood. We, even in our faltering faith, believe in your son. Now we drink of the fruit of the vine which represents the blood of the covenant. In doing so, we commit ourselves again to our part of the agreement. You renew your promises in our hearts as we await the goal of our faith, even the saving of our souls eternally with you. Father, when we contemplate these things, we know that no praise is too extravagant. With hearts filled with awe and rejoicing, we thank you for his life which is given to us. Amen.

God and Father of all mankind, as we are gathered here today as a small number of your people celebrating our salvation, we envision the millions of others over the earth who share in your fellowship and ours. In your grace and mercy, you have washed us and reconciled us through the offering of Christ on the cross. We are all one body and family in you and in Christ. We commune with you and with one another while examining and judging only ourselves. Father, thank you for this fellowship into which you have called us. We know that you did not accept us because of our own merit, goodness, or correctness, but you accepted Jesus' merit for our sinfulness. His lifeblood bought us back from Satan. We thank you for this fruit of the vine which pictures that blood of sacrifice for us. As we all drink of it today, we are reminded that his offering is still effective for us. Thank you for continual cleansing as we live in fellowship with all whom you have accepted. Amen.

## **Your Prayers**

Just as we read prayers and praise while we sing, you may read your prayer in leading the assembly. If any of the prayers written above express what you wish to pray, copy them and read them. Or write out your own words and read them.

Pass these or other prayers on to the men, especially the younger ones, and urge them to make them their expressions also.

Suggest to the elders that more time be given for the Lord's Supper and that some capable person be put in charge to create a more meaningful communion through thoughtful comments, teachings, scripture readings, and prayers.

I hope that you have not judged me to be presumptuous or arrogant in this effort to make our communion a more worshipful experience.

(Some of my thoughts have come from *The Lord's Supper* by Warren Lewis, of *The Living Word* series of studies for adults. It was published in 1966 and withdrawn quickly due to protests by some influential brothers.)

## Chapter 16

### COMMUNION WITH BREAD, WINE, AND MONEY

For half a century I joined others in pleading for a separation of the collection from “The Communion.” Most of us have taken the collection baskets off the table and some churches pass them at another point in the service.

Now in my senility I wonder if collection trays really are out of place on the table and if a separation is needed.

Such words as *commune*, *communion*, *fellowship*, *sharing in common*, *participation*, and *partnership* derive from the same root in the Greek. In our traditional usage we have made them too diverse in meaning. For instance, we do not usually think that *participate* and *commune* mean the same thing. All the italicized words in this essay, however, are interchangeable with their other noun and verb forms.

“The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a *participation* in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a *participation* in the body of Christ?” (1 Cor. 10:16 RSV). This ritual of *participation* is generally thought of as “The Communion.” *Sharing* in the one body is depicted by eating the bread; *sharing* in the atonement is depicted by drinking the cup.

We are called upon to eat the bread and drink the cup in remembrance of Jesus as a mutual reminder. But there is another *communion* which we are called upon to remember. It is “...*taking part* in the relief of the saints...” (2 Cor. 8:4). The apostles in Jerusalem gave Paul and Barnabas the right hand of *fellowship* (*communion!*), not demanding that they teach circumcision, but “only they would have us to remember the poor...” (Gal. 2:9f). In remembering the poor, we are urged to “*contribute* to the needs of the saints” (Rom. 12:13).

In remembering the poor by giving them aid is to *share* their poverty. It is a *fellowship* in, a *participation* in, their destitution. “The poor” also includes persons who impoverish themselves in evangelistic activity like Paul did. Paul lovingly reminded the Philippians that “...in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into *partnership* with me in giving and receiving except you only...” (Phil. 4:14-16). He also urges, “Let him who is taught in the word share all good things with him who teaches” (Gal. 6:6). Such special collections are now mostly supplanted by regular giving to support our own self-serving local programs. Noting our shameful neglect of the poor and evangelism, it is no wonder that we would want to obscure this ritual of giving.

We remember our *fellowship* with all others in the one body when we eat the bread. We remember our *fellowship* with all the saved ones when we drink the cup. We remember our *fellowship* with the poor when we give aid. Just as the eating and drinking are in remembrance honoring Jesus, so is the giving, for “truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” (Matt. 25:40). Giving to human need is a *communion with*, a *sharing with* Christ.

Giving was not a part of the supper instituted by Jesus nor were regular collections called for in the scriptures. Neither is limited to certain days and formal assemblies. Giving is not a part of the supper. It is a *communion*, however, even though not “The *Communion*” as we have come to make distinctions.

Rather than the often heard announcement, “We have completed our *communion* service and will now take a collection,” would it not be better to hear something like, “We have *communed* by means of bread and fruit of the vine in memory of Jesus, and now we will *commune* with Him in another manner by *communing* with and remembering the poor through the money we give?”

## Chapter 17

### THURSDAY IS THE LORD'S DAY TOO!

Although the first day of the week became a special day for assemblies in the early centuries, it was not in response to a command or an explicit, binding example. Our inclination toward legalism has led us to try to bind it as a special day to be given to God. We have demanded certain activities on that day and limited their practice to it. This conviction is based upon supposed inferences.

In pre-Christian times in the Roman Empire, *kuriakos* (the lord's) signified *imperial* or *belonging to the lord*, the emperor. As the empire became Christian, it is not surprising that they would modify *belonging to the lord* to relate to Christ as a part of their protest against Caesar-worship.

As time went by, many of the rules of the Sabbath were transferred to the first day of the week, but this was rejected in the Reformation by Luther and Calvin. Calvin even proposed to adopt Thursday in the place of Sunday. (See International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, V. 3, p. 1919-1920).

May we rightly consider Thursday as the Lord's day? Yes, Thursday is the Lord's day!

At the end of the persecutions in 325 A.D., because the first day of the week was so special to the Christians, Constantine, the Emperor, made it a holiday (holy day) throughout the empire. That accommodation has greatly influenced the Western world and has been a blessing to the disciples through succeeding centuries. The wide acceptance of that holiday has given it a respected authenticity. As with other accepted practices, efforts to authenticate it by the Scriptures came after the fact through scholasticism. The term *Lord's day* is used only once in the Scriptures (Rev. 1:10), and in that instance it was not referring to the first day of the week but to an epoch.

There are two questions that we must ask and answer. First, do the Scriptures demand that the first day of the week be a sanctified day for disciples? Second, was the first day referred to in the Scriptures as the Lord's day?

The first day of the week is mentioned in inspired church history only two times. That point should arouse enough suspicion about its sanctity to cause us to reexamine the matter. When Paul made his way to Troas, the disciples had a gathering and meal with their honored guest (Acts 20). There is nothing to indicate that this was more than a special meeting or that it was, or became, a regular practice. It is recorded that they met *to break bread*. To break bread is translated from a Hebrew idiom which means *to partake of food* as in the eating of a meal. There is nothing that would indicate that this meal was the communion. An uncertain premise destroys the validity of any conclusion based upon it.

The other mention (1 Cor. 16:1f) does not relate either to a ritual or to an assembling of disciples on that day.

Since no law concerning a certain day is given in the New Testament Scriptures, it is only by specious logic that men try to make an ordinance of it. Such is an effort to define laws so that we may be justified by keeping them.

Not only were the apostles silent about obliging us to keep certain days, they actually warned us about observing days. “You observe days, and months, and seasons, and years! I am afraid I have labored over you in vain” (Gal. 4:10). Read the entire context of “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath” (Col. 2:16). Paul did not add, “Except for the Lord’s day which is the first day of the week.”

True apostolic teaching puts keeping of days and the eating of foods in the realm of indifference along with circumcision. Paul permits the weak brother to respect days but not to bind his scruple on others or condemn others who do not hold his conviction. He writes, “One man esteems one day as better than another, while another man esteems all days alike. Let every one be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. He also 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. 14:5f). Paul does not permit either side of the day-keeping controversy to pass judgment on the other. It is the whole person, not certain days or hours, who is sanctified. Every day is raised to the highest plane making us no closer to God or more priestly at one time than another.

If the Lord’s day is a specific day, then we would have to say it is the Sabbath because of Jesus’ own claim, for he himself declared, “For the Son of man is lord of the Sabbath” (Matt. 12:8).

There are numerous instances in the Bible where *the day of the Lord* is used to denote, not a specific day of the week, but his coming in judgment, wrath, vengeance, or retribution to offenders or in deliverance for his people. This term is translated into the possessive form in only one place in apostolic writings, making it *the Lord’s day* (Rev. 1:10) rather than *the day of the Lord*. Both terms mean the same thing.

In the Spirit, John the apostle was transported in vision into the future to see the things that would transpire in the epoch of the Lord’s day or day of the Lord. This was not a day of the week, but it was the manifestation of the Lord against the Jewish nation who had rejected him, and it was the time of his vindication of his saints. This judgment was about to transpire — “what must soon take place” — indicating that Revelation was written before 70 A.D. John was seeing in vision what is referred to as “the Day drawing near” (Heb. 10:25).

If you are having difficulty in accepting this, let me ask you a few questions. Is Sunday holy? Is one day spiritual and another secular? Are some obligations bound on one day but loosed on the next? Are some actions holy if performed on a certain day but profane if done on another? Recently, Stephan Bilak gave me a wallet calendar from the Ukraine. They number their days downward instead of across and have the seventh day in red instead of the first day. In the Ukraine would disciples sin in keeping the seventh day instead of the first day?

Our real problem has related to binding the communion on each first day of the week and limiting it to that day. Is the communion sanctified or is it the day? Our limitation of the communion to Sunday only is without command, precedent, or inference. There is no clear example of the disciples' communing through partaking of the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week. At Troas they met to break bread, but there is no proof that it was the Lord's Supper instead of a common meal. It was after midnight before the bread was broken. That was Monday morning. Paul intended to depart on the morrow after the first day. After daybreak he departed. This was the morrow after the first day of Roman time. If they were following the Jewish time, it still would have been the first day and not the morrow. Besides, Jesus initiated the communion on a weekday evening in an indisputable example. The premise is too weak to imply a lawfully bound conclusion as we have inferred from that text.

In a sense, all days (all time) are holy because our whole lives are dedicated to God. That sanctification is not segmented into days or time spans. In a more real sense, it is not time that is sanctified; it is the disciple who is holy when he or she can say, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). That disciple becomes a temple of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. A temple can be profaned.

Anything that is holy can be profaned. Being holy, the Jewish Sabbath could be profaned by labor on that day. Can Sunday be violated by labor, travel, or some recreational activity? Since we, rather than days, are holy, how can our sanctity be violated? That is accomplished by our sin which is a breach of our dedication, sanctification, separateness, holiness. But sin is not related to any time span. When we sin, we violate our own holiness rather than that of a day. If missing a Sunday assembly scheduled by men is a sin, it is a lacking of sanctification rather than the profaning of a holy day.

Please do not conclude that I am disparaging the need for assembling with disciples or am forbidding communion on Sunday. We all need the support that we gain from sharing with those of like faith. I am saying, however, that these meetings and activities are no more effective on one day than another.

Man was not made for the Sabbath; so Jesus did not bind the keeping of that day at all costs as a legal obligation. The Sabbath was made for man, for God set apart a day to fill the need of man, not to work against his best interest by its inflexibility. In similar manner, assemblies are designed to meet the needs of disciples, but the day and hour of such gatherings are not specified as a law.

Again, I say that the recognition of Sunday as a secular holiday in our society is a wonderful blessing. That has always made it more convenient for us to assemble and it has given social recognition to Christianity that the earliest disciples did not enjoy. To us who were brought up going to assemblies each Sunday, the day seems to have a special hallowed nature. I can appreciate the piety of those who have refused to call the first day Sunday, calling it The Lord's Day instead. And I would favor our making better use of those free hours offered to us by the holiday. But Sunday is neither a holy day nor The Lord's Day.

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Looking back to Calvin's proposal — is Thursday the Lord's day? Yes! So is Friday, Saturday, and all other days. Thursday is the Lord's day but not *The Lord's Day*.

## Chapter 18

### NOT FORSAKING THE ASSEMBLY

“We are commanded not to forsake the assembly on the first day of the week. When you miss a meeting, you sin.”

Does that sound familiar? Especially in the middle half of this century, Hebrews 10:25 was used and misused by well-meaning disciples to intimidate consciences in an effort to enforce attendance to all congregational gatherings. We came to measure a person’s faithfulness mostly by frequency of attendance and to judge the vitality of a congregation by its statistics.

In our sincere zeal we injected into this passage a number of misdirected concepts. Being legalists, it is not surprising that we looked upon attendance as fulfilling our duty even though the assembly attended might have edified little. Overlooking the emphasis on exhortation, we made the meetings into strictly regulated “worship services” in performing our perceived “five items of worship.” Being accustomed to modern ritualistic assemblies on Sundays, we read those elements into this passage. We made *not forsaking* to mean *don’t miss a service*. We demanded that, when the elders set a schedule of meetings, it was a sin to miss even one of them. “They have authority to set them,” we reasoned.

In my childhood the church met only on Sunday mornings. That seemed to have met the requirements. But during my teenage years, the congregation added classes, Sunday evening meetings, and midweek gatherings. Each of these assemblies then became obligatory, or at least our consciences were intimidated in that direction. If failure to attend these extra gatherings was *forsaking the assembly*, then the elders caused many to stumble by adding them!

By reading our ideas into it we made Hebrews 10:25 into a club with which to beat disciples into compliance with a standard of faithfulness set by fellow disciples.

Let us look again at that favorite proof-text to see what it means and does not mean.

Without being too tedious, let us scan the context of this passage. I trust that you are as familiar as I am with the *Hebrews* epistle. The Jewish disciples had three special problems with which to deal. First, there was the question as to the validity of their change from their national and cultural Judaism to Christ. Second, they were being persecuted because of their change. Third, there was the impending destruction of Jerusalem which would finalize God’s rejection of national Israel and confirm this new spiritual kingdom. The believers would need much encouragement because these matters would test their faith and tempt them to turn back from Christ.

In view of this we see exhortations dispersed throughout the epistle. They were urged to pay close attention to what they had heard to prevent their drifting from it (2:1). No evil heart of unbelief should cause them to fall away with hardened heart, but they should exhort one another (3:12f). None should fail to enter promised rest as their hardhearted forefathers had under Moses (4:1f). Having learned of the new covenant with its new mediator, high priest, and benefits, to

turn back would be unforgivable, willful apostasy (6:16). They needed mutual encouragement to hold on to their confession because the day of God's judgment against Jerusalem and national Israel was approaching (10:23f). That discipline of God should not become a cause of stumbling for them. By it God was to shake heaven and earth like he did at Sinai to remove the shaken nationalism of Israel and to confirm the spiritual kingdom which cannot be shaken (Ch. 12).

The day *approaching* was *the Lord's day*, but not the first day of the week. It was the time of the coming of the Lord in vengeance upon the Jews for their rejection of Jesus. John was transported into that epoch in the Spirit by vision (Rev. 1:10) to see in panorama God's visitation. God has no holy days now.

By this brief review we can see how the disciples would need the confirmation, support, and encouragement of each other. So the writer is urging them to have support gatherings. He is not commanding meetings for routine ceremonial worship. Whether those gatherings were to be formal or informal was of no concern. No format is offered. A specific day of the week, being inconsequential, is not mentioned. Frequency and length of such gatherings is left to their discretion. Whether those gatherings were to include all disciples in an area or only one's closer neighbors and friends is given no hint. We have to inject into the passage our modern concepts in order to say that the writer had regular, organized, systematic, ritualistic assemblies on the first day of each week under consideration. There is no command, example, or inference for such a pattern. Rather than warning against forsaking ritualistic services, he is exhorting the believers not to forsake *each other* in their times of trial!

Rather than the body being made a mediator, its members were to be intercessors. The assemblies were not to become the route to heaven but way stations along the route.

Let us look at Hebrews 10:23-25 again: "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." (RSV).

This exhortation is not characterized by specifics of a law. It cannot be fulfilled by adopting our own specifics and then enslaving others to them. Lawful demands may be met without producing love, edification, and encouragement — a point amply demonstrated in our congregations. This is not the inauguration of a scorecard system of righteousness. These associations were not to prove faithfulness but to encourage faithfulness.

God knows that we all need others of like mind and he encourages us not to neglect interactive meetings. But my faithfulness is not altogether dependent upon the support gained in assemblies. Gatherings for mutual edification were much more needed in their day when individuals did not have Bibles, printed materials, mail, telephone, radio, television, tapes, and videos dealing with our needs. They had to depend mostly on person-to-person interaction.

Although I continue to be a part of ritualistic assemblies, the encouragement that I get from them is often minimal, for they tend to begin at 10:00 o'clock sharp and end at 11:00 o'clock dull! I gain more uplift from the "hello-ship" with others than from the routine. But the encouraging

letters and calls that I receive from across the country and other countries sustain me more than the formal assemblies. The purpose is accomplished; the means by which it is satisfied is of less importance.

Do you think that I am overplaying our misdirection, or that we have outgrown it? A few weeks ago I read this in a church bulletin: “Sister Hayes was a faithful Christian here for many years until ill health prevented her from attending services.” How horrible! Yes, we all need association with other disciples; however, *to miss* does not mean *to forsake*! And in the case of this poor woman, any *forsaking* would be on the part of her fellow disciples who abandoned her when she needed their encouragement, the very attention which our text was intended to foster.

It is proper to review the New Testament writings and see how little attention is given to assemblies other than to correct abuses in them. There is no command for us to assemble. But in our penchant for law, we have tried to make this persuasive exhortation of our text into a law. We tend to revise the meanings of passages to accommodate centuries of tradition. The scriptures emphasize our personal relationship to God in Christ with his Spirit ruling in our hearts and working through us.

There is only one mention of the church meeting on the first day of the week, and there is no indication that it was a regular practice before or after Paul’s visit there (Acts 20:7). They met *to break bread* — an idiom meaning *to eat a meal*. Evidently, the fellowship meal was a common setting for their mutual edification in early times. There is no proof that this breaking of bread was participation in the Lord’s Supper. And besides, it was Monday morning when they broke it. We have built too big a case on an uncertain premise. Any conclusion based upon an unproved premise is invalid.

By this essay I am not denying the value in regular assemblies. I am exhorting us to give proper purpose, direction, and emphasis to them and to recognize the limited, legalistic concept that we developed about them. There is nothing that is done in formal assemblies, however, that cannot be done with others at home or where two or three are assembled in his name.

Accepting that our text with its context sets forth a principle to guide us today, we recognize our need to be involved for the common good. We will enjoy being with those of like faith and hope. We will thrive on mutual encouragement. We will leave those supportive sessions invigorated in faith and more fervent in love for each other. Those periods of nonjudgmental interaction will promote an awareness of equality and the common nature of all disciples. No one will have to beg us to return. It will not be a matter of assembling in order to exhort us to assemble the next time to fulfill a duty. What a sad thing when this happens!

But where do we find such a setting? Improvement is being seen in some congregations, but most of our assemblies are still structured, formalized, and ritualized into a spectator experience where the individual’s painful need at the time may not be addressed even remotely. I am convinced that if we will revise our whole design for assemblies so as to meet the individual needs, we will not have to intimidate disciples in order to assure their return. This would call for meetings for groups with special needs at various times in the week or month instead of our

customary “whole church come together” at one time concept and practice. It might even prove the professional pulpiteer to be both unnecessary, anachronistic, and burdensome.

Before you consign me irrevocably to the nether regions for trifling with our traditional proof-text and practices, please look at it and them with a renewed awareness and honesty. And you may profit by pondering this observation of Jeroslav Pelikan: “Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”

## Chapter 19

### ACTS 20:7 ONE MORE TIME

In my other books I have challenged some of our teachings based on interpretations of Acts 20:7. It may serve a good purpose for me to treat more fully this text which has been related to the Lord's Supper at this time.

Why would this text deserve such attention? With our people in the Church of Christ, it has served as a proof-text for several suppositions. It has been used to substantiate claims that we are commanded to partake of the Lord's Supper each and every Sunday and exclusively upon that first day of the week. This contention and practice has been one of our identifying marks. The related conviction has emboldened our people to reject and condemn those who vary from it.

As you will discern from this treatise, I am emphasizing the purpose and importance of the Communion rather than disparaging it. I want to encourage a richer meaning in participation than is felt in keeping a commanded law or ritual.

Neither Jesus nor any inspired writer prescribed the day or frequency for this memorial observance. In their effort to be correct in every ritualistic detail, sincere disciples have sought to define the required procedures with exactness through command, example, and inference. Let us reconsider the whole matter together now.

As Paul started back to Jerusalem, he determined to go through Macedonia. Seven of the brothers accompanying him went ahead and waited for him at Troas. After the days of Unleavened Bread, Paul came to Troas where he stayed for seven days, hastening to be at Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost.

Now for our text: *“On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the morrow; and he prolonged his speech until midnight. There were many lights in the upper chamber where we were gathered. And a young man named Eutychus was sitting in the window. He sank into a deep sleep as Paul talked still longer; and being overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead. But Paul went down and bent over him, and embracing him said, ‘Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him.’ And when Paul had gone up and had broken bread and eaten, he conversed with them a long while, until daybreak, and so departed.”*

How could this passage come to have importance in relation to the Lord's Supper? Without some coaching, the casual reader would see no connection since the communion is not mentioned. But as our people turned toward legalism, they looked to Acts 2:42 as a pattern for four of our “five acts of worship” for our Sunday assemblies. In this passage it is stated that the Jerusalem disciples “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers,” though neither the first day of the week nor formal assemblies are mentioned there. Our people interpreted this “breaking of bread” to be the Lord's Supper in spite of the third sentence to follow stating, “And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2:46).

The first *breaking of bread* has been interpreted as being Communion and the second as eating food. To interpret the second mention as Communion would have made the Supper proper on any day of the week. That would have destroyed the pattern for Sunday assemblies. But Acts 2:42 does not mention a time for partaking. So those who would establish a pattern grasped Acts 20:7, which connects the breaking of bread and the first day of the week, to “prove” a certain time that neither Jesus nor any inspired writer legislated.

### **Looking For A Pattern**

If we were under a legal code, then we could rightly look for patterns of technical correctness. If we varied from the patterns, then restoration would be demanded. The pioneers of our movement accepted the New Covenant scriptures as our guide but not as a legal code. In time those of the Stone-Campbell heritage became misdirected into being legalists, patternists, and restorationists. Such a course is divisive by nature, for people cannot agree on what the supposed law requires, when its pattern is violated, and when it is restored properly.

In Acts 20:7 we have found the only mentioned connection of the first day of the week and the breaking of bread. But does to *break bread* mean to participate in the Communion? There is no proof that it does. The round, flat loaf of bread of the Jews was not cut, but it was broken or torn apart. *Breaking bread* became an idiom or expression meaning *to eat a meal* or *to eat food*. Its use with that meaning is unquestioned (See: Matt. 14:19; 15:36; 26:26; Mark 6:41; 8:6,19; 14:22; Luke 9:16; 22:19; 24:30).

“Now as they were eating (the Passover meal: CH), Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body’” (Mt. 26:26. See similar references listed above). “The bread which we break” and “he broke it” (1 Cor. 10:16; 11:24) relate to the Lord’s Supper, but they are not used as idioms meaning *to eat the Lord’s Supper*.

There is no proof that the communion is meant by *to break bread* in Acts 20:7. It can only be an assumption. It does seem more reasonable to assume that they would delay the Communion rather than a fellowship meal until the wee hours of the morning. Any conclusion based upon an unproven premise is invalid. God did not bind on us regulations derived from inconclusive reasoning.

Now, after belaboring that point, we will grant for argument’s sake that Acts 20:7 does refer to the Lord’s Supper. We will see whether it fits the pattern and proves the contentions.

### **A Precedent?**

The text states that the disciples met on the first day of the week at Troas to break bread. It does not indicate that they had been doing that previously or that they continued the practice afterward. If Luke had indicated that he recorded that incident as an example for us to follow, of course, we would be eager to look for what was exemplified. Luke recorded a historical account. Incidental details of it are not examples unless a command or principle is involved. For instance, the jailer’s baptism is not a “binding example” of baptism. The authority for it is in Jesus’ command rather than the jailer’s immersion.

Some make an example of Paul's travel schedule, asserting that he arranged it to permit his meeting with the group on the first day of the week. But they do not make an example of his staying in Macedonia until after the days of Unleavened Bread or his hastening to Jerusalem for the Passover.

A historical detail may reveal an acceptable way a thing may be done but not necessarily the only way. For instance, Paul traveled by land and sea, but no one would think that his example would exclude air travel today.

If we are inclined to conjecture as to why Luke recorded the Troas incident, it is more reasonable to conclude that it was in order to tell us of Paul's greatest miracle, the restoring of life to Eutyclus. But we have overlooked the more obvious purpose in our search for proof of an unwarranted contention.

Someone may be wishing to remind me that, just as "remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" included every Sabbath, so the mention of the first day of the week meant every first day. I taught that also for many years, having inherited the illogical argument as the rest of us did. It is true that as each Sabbath came, it would be included in the command and should be kept holy. But "on the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread" indicates only one specific occasion. Suppose that I should tell you, "On the Fourth of July when the family gathered at my parents' home to have a reunion, Dad had a heart attack." Would you conclude that identical events had occurred during each previous year or that they continued each year after that? Certainly not! The account of the gathering at Troas offers no indication that they had been doing it previous to the coming of this special guest. And there is no command or inference that such meetings were to be continued weekly thereafter.

Still granting that they met to commune, they did not do it at Troas on the first day of the week! Paul continued his speech until midnight when he was interrupted by Eutyclus' fall. Then in the early morning they broke bread. That puts the communion on Monday!

Contenders argue that they participated in the Lord's Supper earlier in the evening and that the breaking of bread after midnight was a fellowship meal! That is an assumption in direct contradiction of what is written. It says they met to break bread and then tells when they broke it. Why reject the plain revelation in order to uphold a presupposition?

If they observed Jewish time in Troas, since the first day would begin on Saturday evening, it would still be the first day of the week after midnight. That would sanction their intention of participation on Saturday night. Would that be acceptable?

But they were following Roman (and our) time with the day beginning and ending at midnight. How do we know that? Our text says Paul was "intending to depart on the morrow." That would be Monday. After the meal and the conversation until daybreak, Paul departed. So his departure "on the morrow" was on Monday. If the Jewish time was observed, it would still have been the first day of the week, not the morrow. So, granting that this breaking of bread was the Lord's Supper, we have approval of participation on Monday! There is no escape from that conclusion, as though we should be seeking escapes.

## Five Possibilities

In searching for a specified time for participation in the Communion, I find only five possibilities in the Scriptures.

1. The first day of the week is supported by Acts 20:7, as we have just discussed.
2. Jesus gave us an approved example of midweek evening participation by his inaugurating it on a Thursday evening.
3. Jesus initiated the Supper during a Passover meal. As often as they observed the Passover, which was annually, they remembered the passing over of the Lord in sparing the firstborn and their escape from Egypt. In giving the cup, Jesus urged, “Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:25f). How would the apostles interpret *as often*? Relating it to the Passover that they were observing, they would likely understand it to be annually. Is that not obvious?
4. In the first church they were breaking bread *day by day* in their homes along with taking of food with glad and generous hearts (Acts 2:46). The breaking of bread and partaking of food may mean the same thing, but again, they may not.
5. The time and frequency of participation in the Lord’s Supper were not ordered or suggested by Jesus or inspired writers. One short sentence from one of them would have defined the matter forever. It was a matter of indifference to them. These decisions were left to the judgment of disciples in their different circumstances.

This fifth possibility is abhorrent to the legalist who feels that his right standing before God is attained by correctness of detailed procedures. But this answer is in true harmony with the aims and purposes of the Communion. The Supper is intended to keep the atonement by which we are saved ever fresh in our minds. It is a remembrance of his sacrifice and of his saving us in his one body. Those meanings are reinforced by taking tangible bread and wine representing the body and blood in a ritual ceremony with others. It is a participation, or sharing, in Christ with fellow disciples. It is a declaration that he is coming again.

What possible advantage could a certain time of day or day of the week offer in fulfilling those purposes? Disciples are free to decide whether the communion serves their purpose best weekly, daily, monthly, annually, or at chosen times on no set schedule. It is the purpose and benefit rather than a supposed law that should govern our participation.

Although our sincere people in the Church of Christ have loudly denounced others for their observance of special days, we have ignored the plain fact that we were demanding that the first day of the week be given special observance. Please read the chapter in this book titled “Thursday Is The Lord’s Day Too!”

The strengthening value of meditation on the saving role of Jesus is not affected by the day of the week. The kind of container used has nothing to do with the purpose. Whether the bread is leavened or unleavened does not affect our mutual participation. Our proclamation of his return is not dependent upon the state of the grape juice, whether fresh or fermented. Whether bread or wine is taken first or both at the same time does not change the meaning of the memorial ritual. The oneness of the body is depicted whether it is served weekly or monthly. These various details are neither specified nor set forth as exclusive patterns. They are left to our judgment.

The purpose of the Communion is not to gain favor with God through correct rituals. It is not a sacrament through which God pours grace into the soul, nor does it remove sins. It is not a performance to prove to God that we are willing and able to obey commands in order “to be well-pleasing in thy sight.” It does not serve as an attendance check for the Lord.

My plea is that we emphasize the meaning and purpose of the Supper instead of the technicalities of procedure. Let our participation be frequent enough to continually strengthen our faith and commitment. By it let us always be proclaiming that he is coming to receive us. May our unity with God in Christ and with all the saved in one body ever be emphasized so that we will cease rejecting other disciples. Let it ever remind us vividly of our participation in the atonement.

Let us live in appreciation of the communion, the fellowship, the sharing, the mutual participation in all the benefits of Christ.

## Chapter 20

### OUR FATHER WHO ART *WHERE* ?

All of us know where God is, do we not? Jesus taught us to pray, “Our Father who art in heaven.” “Thus says the Lord: ‘Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool’” (Isa. 66:1). These, along with other similar passages, identify his location clearly, don’t they? Or do they?

The essence of God is beyond our finite imagination and comprehension. The concepts that we form about God’s omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience are all related to our own nature, experiences, and surroundings. So our imagery of him may be no more than a faint clue to his real nature.

God is not perceived through human senses, for “No one has ever seen God; only the Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.” (John 1:18). “God is a spirit,” and “A spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have” (John 4:24; Lk. 24:39). He is invisible (Col. 1:15).

In order to accommodate man’s limitations, God is often portrayed in Scripture as having human qualities. Identifying him as being like a man, he is said to have thoughts, mind, will, emotions, voice, body, hands, eyes, ears, and definite location. Such anthropomorphisms, or humanizations, aid man in relating to God, but they all accommodate our inability to comprehend the essence of an infinite Spirit.

If God is in heaven, then where is heaven? Is he always up there in the sky? If we lift up hands to God in prayer, in which direction do we lift them? On this tilting, spinning planet, praying people would be lifting their hands in all directions of the vast sphere surrounding us. From their different earthly locations they would be looking in opposite directions; yet all would be correct in their simplicity. Does our deity hover the earth in some corporate form like a stationary satellite? Or is He not also in the frozen boulder on the highest mountain as well as in the molten core of the most distant star?

God is the self-existing source of all that exists. Just as there is no past or future, as man conceives them, with the I Am, there is no *location* of him either. His nature permeates all that exists. The elements of the expansive universe are the mind, thoughts, or words of God realized, crystallized, materialized, or made to be truth. He is intelligence that needs no neurological, electrical impulses or symbols of language like we in physical bodies employ in communicating.

#### God’s Thoughts

Can we know the thoughts, mind, and will of God? Yes, but only in infinitesimal bits. When we discover the composition of water, as an example, we have discovered his thought. When we learn more in any scientific study of physics, psychiatry, botany, biology, mathematics, chemistry, or any other field, we have learned more of God’s thoughts and will. Some of the nature of God is in each atom. Take God from the elements, and they would cease to exist. “In him all things hold together,” for he is “upholding the universe by the word of his power” (Col.

1:6; Heb. 1:6). He is impervious to water, heat, and other elemental conditions for he is in them all. Could we understand all this, we would be as God. Doesn't this relate to the temptation of Eve?

All peoples have been able to know some of the nature of God. Paul declares that he has always been evident, "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made" (Rom. 1:19f). The divine nature is to be discerned in each element. Jesus' body was made of the very elements which he himself had created as the eternal Word, and thus the Word became flesh (John 1:14).

We do not look to a temple, a mountain, or a location in the sky to find God. Although he is "in heaven" and "beyond the azure blue," he is not limited there. He is much more intimate, for "in him we live and move and have our being." We are his offspring (Acts 17:26,29). Paul included the pagans in that declaration. Life was breathed (inspired) into Adam, an animation with the Spirit of God himself which continues in each human being. Even the lower forms of life must have received their animation from the Source of life also. His spiritual endowment in us is corrupted by our misdirection, but God is eager to regenerate it, give it immortality, and receive it back as a part of his Presence.

According to Paul, God still has plans for the entire spoiled creation, both animate and inanimate, even though we cannot comprehend his promise: "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God." (Rom. 8:19f).

### **The Fullness of Deity**

Even though "the word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14), Paul tells us that in that state, "in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col. 1:19), and the Hebrews were told that "he reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature" (Heb.1:3). Regenerated ones share in this, "for in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness of life in him" (Col. 2:9f). This fullness of life includes body with soul and spirit, with the indwelling deity.

While Jesus was in the flesh, Philip requested, "Show us the Father." Jesus responded, "He who has seen me has seen the Father." Deity accommodated man's lack of perception by taking a fleshly nature to house his divinity on earth at a point in time. And he gave physical demonstrations of miracles including the resurrection to demonstrate the unseen fullness of deity that he possessed.

Concerning his disciples, Jesus prayed "that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know

that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me” (John 17:21f). Usually we quote those words in urging unity among disciples, and that is proper. But the real focus is on our sharing the very glory and nature of the one deity. Not only are we one with other believers, but we are one with our Creator whose very essence is in us.

“In him was life,” and “I am the Life” reveal the source of life breathed into all mankind through Adam. Then the believer is given a regenerated, fuller life, but we still do not enjoy the fullness of deity. We advance from one degree of glory to another as we respond to the encouragement to be filled with the Spirit. We may enjoy the indwelling Presence while not perfectly filled by him. When Jesus urged, “Abide in me, and I in you” (John 15:4), he surely wanted us to know of his inward presence even though it would not empower us with all the nature of deity in the flesh. Even his glory and power were limited voluntarily while he was in his humiliation as the Son of Man.

Jesus also prayed, “and now, Father, glorify thou me in thy own presence with the glory which I had with thee before the world was made” (John 17:5). He ascended back to that glorious state and has promised to come for us to receive us into that glory also. That leads us to think of our resurrection.

### **Our Transfer**

Our transfer from our earthly life in God to the heavenly is also described in metaphors relating to the physical. The resurrection is pictured as a reconstitution and immortalizing of our physical bodies. That employs our physical senses which are our only understandable point of reference. We have no way to comprehend the infinite state or action of the spirit.

This physical approach raises many questions. At what age or in what state will the body be raised and immortalized? For me, will it be my youthful body, or a mature one, or as I am now in old age? Most of us would not want a body just like the one we now have. We would want features that we never possessed in our earthly life. The person born without limbs, for instance, would want additional features. Will my younger brother who died at the age of two be raised as an infant and be forever such? Will he be given memory, knowledge, and speech which he never had? Since there will be no marrying or giving in marriage, will we have male and female features? Will an immortal body need a digestive system? The questions are innumerable.

I am not able to imagine a physical circumstance of eternal bliss. All fleshly pleasures soon become a boredom and weariness. And when it comes to those *mansions* (a misunderstood promise!), if each of us has one, then each of us will live alone. Who looks forward to living alone eternally? All such questions arise from our lack of perception of spiritual things.

“Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable” (1 Cor. 15:50). So we will be changed into a spiritual body. However, a *spiritual body*, as we think of a body, is a contradiction of terms. How puzzling our earthly concepts are!

God breathed life into us. It degenerated, but through Christ may be regenerated. In raising our bodies it will be breathed into us again. But *breathing* is a metaphor relating to our physical bodies.

“I will come again and will take you to myself” (John 14:3) is a sure promise. Ever in him and he in us, the veil limiting comprehension of the spiritual will be dropped. *“Beloved, we are God’s children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is”* (1 John 3:2). What a revelation! At last we will see/comprehend deity! We will be like him! We will see his glorified state and share his glory! Sharing the nature of the I AM, the Truth, and the Life, we shall no longer be limited in thought, space, and time. The Son shall have set us free!

Perhaps, I have wandered too far from my topic of locating God. However, it seems to me that a consideration of his nature and of our relationship to him are essential to any discussion of where to find him.

### **Satan: A Personification**

How can Satan fit into this picture? If God is omnipresent, where is Satan? I have trouble here, as with so many other points, vague but long held. Perhaps Satan is more metaphorical than I have thought. Here is a suggested answer to my question.

Man was created with limited capacity to think. Although he has some of the nature of divinity, the fullness of deity is not in us. That leaves room for ignorance, deception, and self-will — things opposite to the essence of the Creator. Satan is a personification of all that is contrary to the mind of God. Those things in us are characterized as the work of Satanic power. In making us vulnerable to those alienating conditions, God also made himself vulnerable to loss by his self-limitation. In our inability to know all truth and to be completely filled with the nature of divinity in our present existence, we cannot be in fellowship with God by our own doing.

This is where grace enters the picture. We believe and accept him who is the fullness of divinity. He lives in us, making us fit for his presence by crediting his merit and divinity to our account. He accepts us as though we were perfect and glorious now, and He will make it real later. But through those who do not seek immortality, God suffers a loss for making himself vulnerable.

Where is God? Mystery remains. Although he is without definite location, he permeates all. I can talk to him as one beside me or within my consciousness. And I hope that this little treatise has made you more aware of his Presence.

Mystified and in awe, I can still cry out with Paul: “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable 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. 11:33f).

## Chapter 21

### DOES NATURE REVEAL GOD'S LOVE?

No, God's love is not revealed through nature.

Some of the characteristics of God are made known through the material universe and its marvelous workings. "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Psa. 19:1). We all have discovered that truth for ourselves by observation. "Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made" (Rom. 1:20). Nature's demonstration of the glory, power, and divinity of our Creator has left peoples of all ages without excuse for failing to honor him. Is not God's love likewise exhibited in his creation?

In the cool of these summer mornings I often sit on our patio and enjoy the world about me. The sunshine brightens our day, sending its life-giving light. Clouds floating above remind me that God refreshes the earth with rain. Both cultivated flowers and wildflowers add much beauty to my life. The flourishing lawns and trees offer many blessings to our existence. My little garden almost always offers some delicious morsel. Birds are everywhere with their early morning chatter and calls. The serenade of the mockingbird delights and fascinates me. Growing up on a farm as teenagers, my brother and I would sleep outside during the summer, and there we would marvel at their repertoire repeated almost continuously evening and morning. The pets of the neighbors are out-those dogs and cats which offer so much love. Don't all of these beautiful and pleasant things which enrich my life loudly proclaim the care of a loving Creator?

Who but a pessimist or cynic or killjoy could deny that the whole of God's provision for us in his universe is an emphatic declaration of his concern for us? Since "God is love," is not that characteristic of his evident in all his creation?

Although the sunlight is pleasing in my backyard, I am aware that its heat is almost unbearable to people in other regions at the same moment. It is scorching the earth and contributing to starvation of countless living creatures. Not only do the clouds drift lazily over me, but they are failing to give moisture to sustain life in some places and devastating homes and crops in other areas by their turbulence and flooding.

While I am enjoying the cool breeze, millions of people are shivering in the cold without proper food, clothing, and shelter.

Rather than serenading me, the mockingbird is yelling out its territorial claim in the language of each other bird that might encroach.

Even though I enjoy the colorful and cheering flowers, they were not created for my enjoyment. They serve to attract bees and other insects for pollination. Those insects, in turn, live off of the vegetation making it almost impossible to grow fruit, vegetables, or flowers without controlling the insects.

Most every living creature depends upon eating other living things for survival. Nature presents a selfish, cruel world preying mercilessly on earth's other inhabitants. It is the food chain that God set in order.

We can visualize the bobcat finding and greedily devouring the nestlings of the chaparral, or roadrunner. Then the bobcat may be killed by a rattlesnake bite. In turn, chaparrals kill rattlesnakes. That is the cycle of nature; the "balance of nature," we call it.

To aid in survival, most living things develop some sort of defense like thorns, unpleasant odor, bitter taste, irritant, toxicity, height, shell, speed, horns, claws, fangs, or protective coloration. But even if they survive the predators, disease, weather, and accidents, each member of every species will grow old and die.

The creation declares its own futility. God declared it good, but evil changed it all. In a passage that I would like to understand better, Paul declared, "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves..." (Rom. 8:19f). The only hope for the natural world and us is redemption from decay.

If the beautiful and pleasant things are put here for our pleasure, we are still disappointed and we lament with Robert Burns:

"But pleasures are like poppies spread.

You seize the flower, its bloom is shed;

Or like the snow falls in the river,

A moment white, then melts forever."

Paul assured pagan listeners at Lystra that God "did good and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness (Acts 14:17). However, Jesus reminds us that God "makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:45). Are we not forced to conclude that the same God sends or permits the destructive forces of his creation to affect the just and the unjust also?

Because they enjoy good health and abundant earthly provision, some disciples think these to be rewards for their righteous living. Such self-congratulation is not fitting. God's provisions are given to the just and unjust. That self-righteous concept would demand that those who endure poor health and impoverishment are unrighteous. Only the sinners would become poor or die!

Nature, considered alone, portrays such a harsh administrator that the essence of pagan religions has been fear. Pagan rituals of worship and sacrifices (even human sacrifices) were efforts to

appease angry gods and entreat their favors. To them their supposed divinities were harsh and vengeful, even capricious, and as likely to harm as to help. Their gods were thought to be rulers over the natural world and at best they offered a mixed message about the natural order. God's love, however, was made known by revelation.

God introduced his love to us, and us to his love. "But God shows (RSV; commendeth: KJV, ASV) his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). *Shows* and *commendeth* are translations of a word which means *to introduce one person to another* (Vine). God's love has been made known through a Person who was a revelation of his Father. God introduced his love through Jesus and we are filled with it by the Holy Spirit, "because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us" (v.5).

Such a concept of divinity dying for the vilest of humanity and entering human hearts was not conceived in the minds of men nor derived from a study of nature. This unique quality of God was revealed.

Nature sends a mixed message at best. God introduces us to his love by introducing us to his Son, and likewise our love is introduced to God by our acceptance of his Son.

Our response and relationship is not out of pagan fears of a wrathful deity but it is an expression of our love engendered by his prior love for us.

## Chapter 22

### **COPYRIGHTED: ALL RIGHTS RESERVED**

When I published my first book, I gave little thought to the obtaining of a copyright for it. As I continued to write and publish, various friends advised me on the reasons and procedures for copyrighting. For a time I entertained the idea, but then I abandoned it.

The copyright notice would tend to give a prestige to my book, I thought. It lends some sophistication, and that held appeal for me as an unsure and unknown scribe. But who looks for the pedigree of a book before reading it?

A copyright demands that you not use my stuff, whether it be a lesson, a book, or a song of praise, without my permission. I may sue! And when permission is given to use it, give me the credit!

This leads me to question my purpose for writing. My intense desire to give redirection to my people moved me to publish my thoughts even though I knew I would meet the resistance of many brothers and sisters. Now that my material is in print, do I wish to restrict and control its use? Surely not. When people tell me they have reproduced a lesson of mine for use in a class or to distribute, I am very pleased. In fact, I am flattered. The more it is read, the better. That helps to accomplish my purpose.

I considered the point that, if they are not copyrighted, opponents may use my teachings against me by misquoting, changing my meanings, and quoting out of context. But a regulation of law cannot stop that. Or, should God have copyrighted the Bible to avoid such misuse?

If I do not reserve all rights to my material, someone may plagiarize it, using it without giving me the credit. It is true that we “borrow” the thoughts of others, but should I be concerned about who propagates what I teach? If I am concerned that the message be spread, why should I be jealous of whoever teaches it? Am I trying to make a name for myself? I’ll admit that it swells my pride a bit to be quoted, but I see my thoughts repeated by others in print without giving me credit. So what? My purpose is being fulfilled.

If I do not forbid the duplication of my material, someone may reprint and sell my product. Now we are getting down to the core of the matter! Money! I want to make money from my teachings. My books are going to make the bestseller list, and I am going to make a bundle!

This takes me back to my motivation: do I write to help others or to make money, or both? Books of a secular nature are written to make money. No problem. Is spiritual guidance for sale? Now we are lancing one of the pus pockets of religion — making a way of gain of spiritual things!

Do I not sell books? Yes. Being retired on Social Security, I cannot publish and distribute them free as I would prefer doing. But, being enabled by many concerned people who want the message of freedom in Christ to go out, we have distributed over 22,000 free copies of [\*Free In\*](#)

Christ. We have relinquished the profits from those books. A lesser number of my other books has been given to persons who could not afford them. My nominal prices enable my operation but by no means pay for my labor; yet I do sell books. True to his promise, God has taken care of my needs.

Didn't Paul write, "The Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:14)? Yes, but Paul took his message without charge to those who needed it. He did not say, "Pay me and I will share spiritual things with you." He proclaimed his message without charge, being enabled by his own tent-making and the help of other disciples. Then those who received the gospel could enable him to proclaim it to others.

David missed out on a gold mine by his failure to copyright his psalms. Perhaps Jesus would not have had to rely on John to provide for his mother if he had reserved all rights to his Sermon on the Mount. And by copyrighting and selling copies of his epistles Paul might have been able to give up tent-making.

But what were their motives? Are mine as pure as theirs?

The law recognizes my ownership of anything that I create whether it is copyrighted or patented or not. The copyright only identifies my property prior to the time it might be contested.

Well, even though this little essay may not be too convincing, we who copyright and retail the spiritual blessings that we would impart have some soul-searching to do.

## Chapter 23

### **DON'T POUR WATER ON THEM!**

If you do not believe that the Holy Spirit works in our lives today, you will consider that Paul's negative exhortation, "Quench not the Spirit", has no present application. If, however, you believe that He lives in us and empowers us, let me propose to you some applications of this negative exhortation.

Phillips offers this rendering (1 Thes. 5:19): "Never damp the fire of the Spirit, and never despise what is spoken in the name of the Lord." The exercise of God-given gifts must not be discouraged. Water is not to be poured on the flames of the Spirit. Spirit directed messages are not to be taken lightly.

Does not each have a gift of the Spirit? Paul declared, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor.12:7). We won't stop here to argue if these are "miraculous" gifts or "inherent" abilities given us individually, for either kind would be of the Spirit. "What have you that you did not receive?" Paul probes; "If you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?" (1 Cor. 4:7). It is most important that we use the endowment given us and to encourage the exercise of the abilities given to others.

We are not just speaking of stifling the Spirit within us by our weak faith, lack of concern, or ignorance. We are concerned here with our disdain, putting down, limiting, and opposing others in the exercise of their gifts.

Countless good men have had the gift of pastoring whom we have refused to recognize as shepherds because they were not also blessed with children. Even though the Spirit enabled them, through our legalistic interpretation, we have ruled them out. And we have suffered because of it.

Gifted evangelists can proclaim Jesus with much power in our very community and, because they do not follow our party line or wear our sectarian name, we zealously oppose them both privately and publicly. Instead of fanning the flames of the Spirit, we pour water on them.

Teachers who have been illumined with deeper insights into the Scriptures are weeded out of the teaching program when they dare to reveal new understandings of doctrines. And private home study groups are often forbidden by the very elders who encourage individual study. They fear that something new may be taught. From such practice, one might get the idea that Paul said, "Quench the Spirit; despise prophesying!"

On the "birthday of the church" Peter declared that, according to God's plan, women would prophesy. In harmony with that Paul approved their teaching prerogative in the Corinthian assemblies as long as they wore the customary veil, corrected certain abuses, and observed the same decorum as applied to men. But this work of the Spirit through women has been doused with the waters of disdain and prohibition through the centuries. What a tragic loss! And what

an awesome accountability we face! His gifts endow while we disallow! “Do not despise prophesying.”

Various persons have been gifted to serve God and man in some private ministry only to be informed that they were in opposition to God because they were not working “though the church under the oversight of the elders.” Turn on the water!

In accord with my upbringing, I formerly had no problem in dealing with the Holy Spirit in my life. He wasn't there! He did nothing! Neither did he work in others! But no longer do I limit the activity of the Spirit. Because he does not do all the evidently “miraculous” things for me that others claim he blesses them with, I do not limit what he may do in their lives. I don't have to oppose all that I do not understand or experience. I would prefer to be in error by mistakenly crediting the Spirit with good things in the lives of others than to be guilty of quenching, disdain, and resisting his work in their lives because of my mistaken judgment.

Our oneness in the body is a gift, for the “unity of the Spirit” is not an accomplishment of man but of the Spirit. But the sectarian spirit, which lets us reject other brothers with whom the Spirit has united us in one body, is a work of the flesh directly opposed to the Spirit. When you reject brothers because they do not agree with you, you are guilty of the devastating sin of working against the Spirit.

A sad aspect to this matter is that our people have not been mean, unkind, or rebellious generally. Like the Jews of Jesus' day, we have been a people zealous for the law. But therein is the tragedy. Our misdirection has come mainly from interpreting the law of Christ as a legal code. Our attitude has become as that of the Pharisees. And if Stephen were writing this, he would probably cry out to us as he did to them, “You always resist the Holy Spirit!” (Acts 7:51).

Would we continue to resist by stoning his messenger, or would we accept the enabling Spirit and encourage those whom he endows? Let us no longer pour water on the flames of the Spirit.

## Chapter 24

### THE REMAINING RESTRICTION FOR WOMEN

Although I could always see inconsistency in the restrictions that we placed upon women in service capacities, I was content to limit women to their traditional roles as a “safe course.” Along with the usual restrictive proof-texts, I often quoted the sharp-witted English writer, Samuel Johnson: “Sir, a woman preaching is like a dog walking on his hind legs. It is not done well: but you are surprised to find it done at all.”

Compelled by honesty with myself, however, in time my studies have forced me to change many strongly conditioned conclusions. Now I must admit that I see only one main restriction hindering a woman from any Christian ministry that her male counterpart can fulfill.

A few years ago I came across a booklet with a long title. These 18 pages titled, “*The Christian Woman May Pray In The Public Worship Assembly*,” were written by Darrell Foltz, a house painter/preacher/missionary. After reading it, I wrote Darrell stating that he had answered every objection that I had except one. If women are accepted in the same capacities as men, I inquired, why did Jesus not choose some women apostles?

Pondering that question after mailing the letter, I concluded that it was because the culture of his society would have considered it objectionable. A few days later I received a similar explanation from Darrell.

That is the chief, if not the only, restriction to be considered relating to the woman’s activity today.

This factor is not too surprising when we consider that social and cultural perceptions are considered relating to various other things like the veil, women’s hair, the kiss, foot-washing, and slavery.

The limiting statements in 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2 were meant to correct improprieties in the conduct of certain women in their particular situations. Paul was not laying down universal prohibitions. He had already told what women could do in 1 Corinthians 11 and had not changed his mind by the time he wrote Chapter 14. He said that they could pray and prophesy in their gatherings.

Paul’s regulations relate to *husband-wife* more than to *man-woman* relations. Man is not the head of woman in a universal sense. I am not the head of your wife; neither do you have authority over my wife. The husband is the head of his wife and she is to be submissive to him, not me. These points are clarified in good studies, or restudies, that are now available in books and tapes.

Simply put: Paul plainly states that women may pray and prophesy, and Phillip had four daughters who did so. And few of us would deny that a woman may rightly do what the

evangelist Phillip did with the Ethiopian eunuch. He preached Jesus to him, and she can preach in a similar manner. So what is the problem other than our prejudicial social conditioning?

Alright, you caught me in my own trap, didn't you? A woman cannot be an elder. An elder must be the husband of one wife. We have never seen a woman with a wife!

It is undeniable that Phoebe was a deacon. (The Greek has no feminine form like the English *deaconess*.) Women are included in the description of deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8-13. Traditionally, we have tried to evade the impact of Paul's teaching here by explaining that he was speaking of *wives* — deacons' wives. But why would deacons' wives need qualities not required of the wives of elders? Women were to qualify as deacons. Yet, it says, "Let deacons be the husband of one wife." If a woman can be a deacon without a wife, why can she not be an elder without one?

The descriptions of elders and deacons are not lists of legal qualification as we have generally perceived them to be, else the lists to Timothy and Titus would be identical. They are, however, the general description of the kind of persons to recognize. Paul used male terms like *man* and *he*, like we do at times, to indicate persons without reference to gender, and he specifically includes women in 1 Timothy 3.

Are you declaring that you will never reach these conclusions? I never thought that I would, either. But when I declared that I would not change my mind, I was really saying to myself that I already knew and understood everything about the subject and would grow no more.

Fortunately, as with the expansion of my waistline, growth is not always intentional, invited, and without resistance. Expansion is of God when we hunger and thirst after righteousness.

Will the women's service be forever restricted as long as anyone objects to their participation? If it is the weak brother whose conscience is being violated, respect must be given to his convictions until he can be taught more fully. But the stubborn person who refuses to grow in understanding is not the weak brother. He is the divisive brother when he demands that his ideas rule.

In Romans 14 and elsewhere Paul called for consideration of persons with scruples about meats, days, and circumcision, yet he did not permit them to bind diet, days, or circumcision. We must not continue to allow contentious people to limit Christian liberty by binding their convictions. Much courageous teaching of the weak brother needs to be done regarding the liberty of women.

It is not the "safe course" to forbid the exercise of the God-given gifts of women in serving.

## Chapter 25

### SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT REVELATION

Perhaps I am one of the last persons who should be writing about Revelation since I have made no special study of the book. So I will ask more questions than I will pretend to answer.

As a beginning question, is it even safe for one to try to explain the book? The consequences of a wrong emphasis are disastrous. If I add to its meanings, I will receive the prophesied plagues; if I minimize its projections, I will be excluded from the tree of life and the holy city. Is it safer just to bypass Revelation or to remain neutral and non-expressive? That fearful prospect has not intimidated countless writers who join the currently popular exercise of predicting the fulfillment of what they call “end times” prophecies.

The person who reads aloud the prophecy and those who hear and keep what is written are promised a blessing. What is the blessing? Is it eternal life? No, for disciples had eternal life before Revelation was revealed. Is it more understanding and assurance? Perhaps, but disciples had those qualities enabling them to endure persecution and martyrdom before this was written. Was the blessing just bragging rights of “I understand the prophecies and you don’t”? And does the blessing to be received outweigh the danger of misinterpretation?

In panoramic vision John was privileged to see the things that “must soon take place” for “the time is near” (1:13). The revelation ends with Jesus declaring, “Surely, I am coming soon” (22:20). This parenthesis of imminence encloses all that is included between the first and last sentences in the book. Am I insane for concluding that all that John includes there was to happen soon, not in our time, but in the time of the seven churches to whom it was all addressed? If these expressions meant that the events would occur after the passing of a few thousand years, what expression could have been employed if the Spirit had wanted to indicate that they would happen soon? If the Spirit meant that they would just begin to happen soon, why did he not say so? There was to be a sequence of events: “Now write what you see, what is and what is to take place hereafter” (1:20). But the time was near for the whole sequence of events which must soon take place. Can we possibly conclude otherwise? And how could Jesus begin to come soon nineteen centuries ago and still not have arrived?

The church in Pergamum was warned, “Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth” (2:16. Compare 2:5; 3:3). Was this a threat to return many centuries later to fight against the church at Pergamum to punish it for the sins of its first century constituency? Are those first century congregations still in existence to receive their punishment? Was the time of the return of Jesus to be determined by a localized group such as the church in Pergamum, Ephesus, or Sardis?

Are the warnings to those churches universal in their application? If so, any unrepentant congregation can hasten the return of Jesus to the earth. And, since he has not returned, it would prove that there have been no impenitent congregations!

The disciples in Thyatira were encouraged to “hold fast what you have, until I come” (2:25). Were they to hold on for many centuries? Those in Philadelphia were told, “I will keep you from the hour of trial which is coming on the whole world” (3:10). Were not these revelations being made to churches in the first century to prepare them for things which would take place in their lifetime? Paul definitely expected Jesus to return in his time. Among other statements confirming this, he wrote, “May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thes. 5:23). Was Paul misguided?

### **The Coming of the Lord**

The *coming of the Lord* is the theme of Revelation. There are various mentions of his coming in both Old and New Testament writings. Do they all refer to the same coming? No. Do they all refer to a coming in a physical body as when Jesus was born of Mary? No. Can I distinguish between all of his comings? No. Do I deny that a final return is yet to occur? No.

Sometimes the *coming of the Lord* or the *day of the Lord* was a rendering of vengeance upon rebellious people or the vindication, comfort, or encouragement of his suffering saints.

Consider the descriptions and terms used in prophesying the destruction of Babylon, of Damascus, of Ethiopia, and of Egypt (Isaiah 13, 17, 18, 19; Compare Ezek. 32). Zechariah 14 is a similar prophecy against Jerusalem, not about the “end times” coming of Christ. These prophecies employ highly figurative, symbolic, and dramatic language with exaggerated imagery of cataclysms. Similar prophecies in similar language are given against Jerusalem and the Jewish nation by Jesus in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21. Parables and other teachings pictured God’s rejection of Israel and his destructive actions against their nation. The events foretold would come in the lifetime of Jesus’ listeners. (Consider these references in order relating them to each other: Luke 16:1931; Matt. 8:11f; 21:3341; 22:14; 23:2939; Luke 16:116.)

At his revelation “every eye shall see him,” but *every* is limited by the appositive identifying clause, “everyone who pierced him.” He was to come with vengeance upon his rejecting people who crucified his Son. They were inviting this when “all the people answered, ‘His blood be on us and on our children!’” (Matt. 27:25).

Could these visions not also be a confirmation of the change of God’s kingdom to the spiritual? Israel had been God’s kingdom and priests. Now John is saying that those redeemed by Jesus’ blood are God’s kingdom and priests (1:6). With the disciples, John shared the kingdom, the tribulations coming upon it, and the patience required to endure (1:9). In the Spirit he was transported in vision to see the *Lord’s Day*, or *Day of the Lord*, the epoch of God’s overthrow of the fleshly kingdom and the reaffirmation of the universal spiritual kingdom. The visionary scenes would not frighten the believer but would give him assurance (1:17f).

The changes from Moses to Christ are dealt with in Hebrews. The transition was not without persecution and distress. Believers were to keep in touch to encourage one another “as you see the Day drawing near” (Heb. 10:25). The epochal Day of the coming of the Lord was imminent

in which God would identify positively the new “kingdom that cannot be shaken” while removing the one shaken (Heb. 12).

Is the traditional late date for Revelation so set in theological concrete that we cannot even consider that John might have written before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.?

### **Why Symbolic Language?**

Would God use symbolic language just to appeal to our curiosity, or was it to avoid incurring more persecutions caused by plainly identifying the men and powers involved? Is it not reasonable to think that inspired prophets gave disciples the key to understanding those prophecies? Why do we not have that key to understanding? I don't know, but perhaps it is because that, after the prophecies were fulfilled, they were not relevant to us in later times. We can see historically what took place, making the symbols irrelevant to us.

If we reject the above, then we ask what person among us knows the meaning of all that is depicted in Revelation? There is a great chorus of expounders, but they are not in harmony. Out of all the discord, to which voice shall we listen? I am told of a longtime student of keen mind who says he has read more than one hundred books about Revelation. His conclusion: Nobody knows what it means! Will you join me in an “amen”?

This week as I sat at the funeral of Willis Jernigan, a studious man who preached and ministered for seventy-seven years, I jotted down another question: Can I suppose that he is on the other shore shouting, “Thank God, I made it here due to my understanding of the prophecies in Revelation”? That question sort of puts Revelation in proper perspective for me.

Departing from my announced plan, I have offered some explanations instead of only asking questions. So just put a big question mark here at the end of this treatise.

## Chapter 26

### **MUST ONE FULLY REPENT BEFORE BAPTISM?**

Most of us preachers have had persons to come to us requesting rebaptism. They had been led, usually by some preacher, to question the validity of their original baptism on the grounds that they had not fully repented of each and every sin before being baptized. Rather than readily rebaptizing such disturbed persons, I have always tried to relieve their fears and insecurity.

We are called upon to “repent and be baptized.” Will partial repentance suffice? Can we be forgiven of sin while still practicing it? A negative answer seems obvious and emphatic, but let us reconsider this matter.

There are two grave problems with such a judgmental view: it demands full maturity at birth, and it insists on accomplished righteousness instead of imputed righteousness.

Repentance is *to have another mind*. It is a change of mind. Hopefully, this change of mind will lead to a change of action; however, it may not. A person might have the sincerest conviction and resolution today to stop taking drugs or drinking liquor, for example, and then be overcome by the temptation tomorrow when withdrawal trauma is experienced. When a person is converted to Christ, he or she may not even be aware of some of their wrong actions or attitudes. Yet when that person begins his life in Jesus, Jesus’ blood cleanses from all unrighteousness as he walks in the light of his fellowship.

The change of mind required is sometimes more general than specific. It may be only a recognition of one’s sinful state and an opening of the heart to the will of God. As a newborn baby, that person will begin to learn, grow, and mature, repudiating his sins as they are identified, but he can never claim to be sinless.

Or, the change of mind and deep conviction may be more specific, however. On Pentecost Peter told his hearers that they had rejected, crucified, and slain the Savior whom God had sent to them. “Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brethren, what shall we do?’” This was not a request for information as to what to do to be saved, but it was a terrified cry of helplessness and despair by persons who felt that their sin was so unforgivable as to bring inescapable doom upon them. It was a rhetorical lament implying that there was nothing that they could do to escape God’s wrath. Peter assured them, however, that if they would change their mind about rejecting Christ and be baptized they would be forgiven of that awesome trespass. He did not enumerate and define all the specific sins practiced by each and every person present and demand an immediate cessation of the practice of them all. This was a call for repentance of their specific sins of rejecting and crucifying Jesus. Peter was not calling for maturity based upon a full enlightenment that very morning. He was moving them into a saving relationship with Christ. The penitent ones would then proceed in the direction of complete sanctification as they continued in the apostles’ teaching, walking in His light.

In order for baptism to be valid, if one must first recognize and turn away from every sin of ignorance, misunderstanding, misdirection, attitude, pride, and prejudice, then none of us would ever qualify for baptism. One may never recognize all doctrinal error that he should repent of for the right side of many controversial issues is never determined. Our new birth is not a leap from depravity to perfection any more than our physical birth was a jump from the womb to a two hundred pound adult on the night of birth.

Truly, the impenitent person will not receive forgiveness in baptism or at other times. He does not change his mind about sin and open his heart to the will of God. He refuses to change when confronted by his sin.

The penitent disciple will grow in sanctification while never reaching perfection in this life. It is not a matter of “I *was* a sinner; now I am saved by grace,” but “I *am* a sinner saved by grace with Christ’s sinlessness given to my account.”

## Chapter 27

### NICODEMUS IN CONTEXT

After attempting to be “a teacher in Israel” for more than half a century, I finally considered the conversation of Nicodemus and Jesus in its context. And it has brought some new meaning to me.

We who believe that baptism is essential and those who do not have turned to Jesus’ statement to Nicodemus for support of our positions. We have generally approached John 3:115 to find the answer to “What must I do to be saved?” while ignoring the context. While admitting that Jesus’ statements ultimately relate to salvation, let us look to learn more completely what he and Nicodemus were talking about.

John the Baptist had come announcing that the kingdom of God was near. He called for repentance and baptism as a public commitment to that kingdom even though he did not call it a new birth. Although baptism comes to us suddenly without explanation in John’s ministry, historians tell us that the Jews were familiar with baptism. We are told that Gentiles who became Jewish proselytes made their commitment known publicly by a ceremony of baptism. Baptism signified their entrance into the hopes and claims of fleshly, national Israel.

While John proclaimed the nearness of the kingdom, he also pointed to the one who would come after him. John then identified Jesus as the Lamb of God. Andrew went to Peter and exclaimed, “We have found the Messiah!” Philip declared that they had found the one whom Moses and the prophets wrote about. And Nathanael answered Jesus, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

Word gets around. A devout ruler named Nicodemus hears these rumors about the Messiah, the king, and the kingdom. He decides to check them out. He comes to Jesus with thoughts of cashing in on his birthright as a Jew which would entitle him to all the benefits, promises, and prerogatives of the restored kingdom. As a ruler he would have special interest because he might be given some seat of power in the restored kingdom.

The recorded conversation is abrupt, but surely they had talked at length about what was on Nicodemus’ mind, or at least Jesus knew Nicodemus’ thoughts. So Jesus explains to him, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” In effect he is saying, “Nicodemus, if the approaching kingdom were a restoration of the nationalistic kingdom of Israel, your citizenship in it would be assured. But I am speaking of a spiritual kingdom. You must abandon Jewish nationalism with its hopes and expectations and be proselyted into a different kingdom. You must undergo a proselyte baptism declaring your change and giving public commitment to a spiritual reign of God. This will demand such an abrupt and complete change that it will be like a new birth. Metaphorically, it will be a new birth of the water of proselyte baptism and the working of the Spirit of God within you. You will no longer be counted as a Jew nor will your Jewishness any longer offer special blessings. Being a Jewish ruler will give you no special prerogatives in the kingdom of God.”

Whereas, in the claims of national Israel, the birth of an Israelite was fully visible and could be attested to by fleshly circumcision, the birth of the Spirit would be as invisible as the wind. Even as the effects of the wind are visible, though, the affected fruits of the Spirit could be seen and attested to. It would be a circumcision of the heart.

The question “What must I do to be saved?” was not the topic of the conversation. Nicodemus was already a devout Pharisee. Although Jesus chided him for his lack of understanding and slowness in believing, he did not reprimand him for any sin or unrighteousness. If he had died the previous night, he would have become one of those under the law whom Christ redeemed (Gal. 4:4f).

To use this metaphor to support the necessity of baptism for the remission of sins is to give it a meaning based upon later revelation on the subject. Nicodemus did not have those teachings but would understand Jesus’ words in the context of his inquiry about the kingdom. He wasn’t inquiring about membership in the church, either.

Years later, Paul alludes to this metaphor in speaking of our transition from any fleshly hopes to the spiritual. By means of a similar proselyte baptism, “He delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son” (Col. 1:13). In the birth of water and the Spirit our allegiance from the fleshly to the spiritual is committed.

And those today who are still hoping for places in a restored nationalistic kingdom of Israel should be reminded: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

Nicodemus looks different in context, doesn’t he?

## Chapter 28

### OUR RESPECTED MYTHS OF RELIGION

It is likely that the title above brought a negative response in your mind. You may be ready to admit that myths are believed in the religion of others. But our myths? No way!

As hard as it will be to sell some of my points, perhaps I should try to camouflage them behind pleasantries and enigmatic metaphors. But I prefer that both your eyes be open so that the truth may look you straight in both of them.

Yes, we have respected myths. Of the different definitions of *myth*, I am referring to this one: “An ill-founded belief held uncritically especially by an interested group.” Some of the most widely believed and accepted matters relating to Christianity and to the Church of Christ in particular are without foundation. We shall consider some of them.

#### 1. JESUS DIED ON A CROSS.

Now wait a minute! You mean that Jesus did not die on a cross? That is blasphemy!

I am not denying that Jesus died for us, but it was not on an upright pole with a crosspiece. Look in *Young's Analytical Concordance to the Bible*. There are twenty-eight listings of the word cross as it is used in the New Testament writings. Young's definition: stake, *stauros*. There is no other definition given.

Look now to *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* by W. E. Vine. Under his listing of the word, he defines and comments at length: “*Stauros* denotes, primarily, an upright pale or stake. On such malefactors were nailed for execution. Both the noun and the verb *stauroo*, to fasten to a stake or pale, are originally to be distinguished from the ecclesiastical form of a two beamed cross. The shape of the latter had its origin in ancient Chaldea, and was used as the symbol of the god Tammuz (being in the shape of the mystic Tau, the initial of his name) in that country and in adjacent lands, including Egypt. By the middle of the third century A.D. the churches had either departed from, or had travestied, certain doctrines of the Christian faith. In order to increase the prestige of the apostate ecclesiastical system, pagans were received into the churches apart from regeneration by faith, and were permitted largely to retain their pagan signs and symbols. Hence the Tau or T, in its most frequent form, with the crosspiece lowered, was adopted to stand for the cross of Christ. As for the Chi, or X, which Constantine declared he had seen in a vision leading him to champion the Christian faith, that letter was the initial of the word “Christ” and had nothing to do with “the Cross” (for *xulon*, a timber beam, a tree, as used for the *stauros*, see under TREE).”

We admit that those two scholars were not inspired, but neither is history or tradition.

There are about two dozen common forms representing the cross out of more than four hundred shapes that have been devised. No other symbol has been so artfully pictured. Yet none of the

forms are represented as a stake or pale. A stake would not be very decorative on a building, on letterheads, or dangling on a piece of jewelry.

Whether you believe that Jesus died on a traditional cross or a stake is of no concern. The efficacy of the atonement is not affected by the shape of the wood. I am bringing this to your attention hoping to challenge you to question inherited ideas and traditional practices. When we can investigate without being defensive, many surprising truths come to cheer us, and our faith will become founded more firmly.

## **2. CHRISTIAN IS A NAME GOD GAVE US TO WEAR.**

This myth is as popularly respected as the one concerning the shape of the cross. Change from its use will be no more likely than changing our image of the cross.

There are several considerations that should arouse suspicion even among the most trusting. The designation is mentioned only three times in the Bible, and those uses were evidently in derision or disparagement. There is no record of one believer calling another a Christian or of accepting that as a name for himself. God did not refer to them by such a name. About ten years after Pentecost, the people of the Gentile city of Antioch called the disciples Christians for the first time. For more of my expressions on this subject, please read the chapter in this book titled "Who Is a Christian?" and Chapter 17 of my book, [\*Free To Speak\*](#).

Accepting no proper name for individual followers of Christ, Alexander Campbell generally referred to them as disciples. Barton Stone preferred to call them Christians.

Even though this is not a God-given designation for us to wear, we may accept it with propriety. Peter urged disciples to glorify God in this appellation which was meant to be derogatory.

## **3. JESUS BUILT THE CHURCH.**

We are not denying that Jesus died to purchase his people and that he built his community of them. But the word *church* should not even be in the Bible! It has been mistranslated from the Greek *ekklesia* which means *called out*. God's called out form his community, congregation, or assembly in both the universal and local sense. The English word *church* is derived from the Greek *kuriakos* which means *of the lord*. No such usage is made of it in the scriptures.

Our people have persistently maintained that the community of believers is named *Church of Christ, Churches of Christ, or church of Christ*. They make the claim while ignoring that a part of that name has no basis for being in the scriptures.

## **4. THE SCRIPTURES PRODUCE THE CHURCH.**

Not one word of the New Testament scriptures was written when the church was produced. Here we are using the word *church* as it is commonly misunderstood. Christ's community was called out and enlarged by the preaching of the gospel. It is through the preaching of the gospel of salvation in Christ that he continues to call his community into being. The apostolic teachings

now contained in the epistles guide God's congregation but they do not produce it. Those called out by the gospel are the new covenant people of God, but they are not the New Testament church as we have thought, for the New Testament and the New Testament scriptures are two different things.

The New Testament scriptures were not written, identified, and collected until generations after the apostles. They could not have produced Christ's community. On the contrary, the disciples of Christ produced the New Covenant scriptures!

## **5. THE BIBLE IS COMPOSED OF THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS.**

We have been taught from preschool through adulthood that the Old Testament is composed of 39 books and the New Testament has 27 books. But that is a myth! The Old Testament (Covenant) is not a book. Neither is the New Testament (Covenant). God has dealt with mankind through agreements/covenants/testaments. We learn of the old covenant through the scriptures that give its history. We learn of the new covenant through those writings that relate to it. Thus, we may rightly speak of the Old Testament writings and the New Testament scriptures. But the writings are not the covenants.

For surprising enlightenment on this subject, please read Carl Ketcherside's marvelous little book, *The Death of The Custodian*, which I have recently reprinted.

## **6. THERE ARE NO ERRORS IN THE BIBLE.**

Did I lose the few of you who have stayed with me? We have been afraid to approach this subject candidly. We may become modernists! We will surely be pounced upon! Let's just not talk about it!

All of our many translations of the Bible are identical, aren't they? Surely not. They all say the same thing in different words, don't they? You know they do not. If they all differ, then only one version could possibly be free from all error. Which version is it?

You may respond that there is no error in the original manuscripts. How do you know? Have you ever seen the originals? We will grant the inerrancy of the autographs. Since we have none of them, that doesn't help in our determination. And since all of the translations that we have differ, we cannot claim to have a version free from all errors.

This does not disturb me. Surely God has preserved the information that is necessary for us to find him. That information is not a legal code whose every point we must understand and obey, making a perfect translation necessary to our eternal life. Our salvation is not conditioned upon perfect knowledge. If we must know and understand all, then we are all without hope. Our concern for versions is born of legalism.

## **Freshness and Assurance**

These six examples illustrate my point that there are many ill-founded beliefs held uncritically by interested groups. More could be listed, such as the Law of Moses being nailed to the cross, Jesus sweating blood in Gethsemane, a thousand-year reign of Christ on earth, the rapture, the coming of a man designated as the anti-Christ, and many others.

Most of these myths are not vital. One may be misinformed about them and still have life in Christ. My purpose here is not to create skepticism but to challenge you to restudy everything that relates to your religious beliefs. Much of the opposition that Jesus raised was due to his challenge of traditional interpretations. The much-needed change that the Spirit is working among us today is bringing pain because it questions so many long-held beliefs.

We like the comfort of old shoes and familiar explanations, but sometimes both should be outgrown. A constant examination of beliefs in which we continue to “prove all things” will add freshness and assurance to our years of life in Christ.

## Chapter 29

### HOOK'S POINTS: A POTPOURRI

Here are items too short for chapters. Some are serious; others may only be chewing gum for the eyes. You probably have had a balanced life without any of this section. But I never seem to know when to quit; so here it goes.

#### ASIDE LINES

For my four years as a “ministerial student” in Abilene Christian College, I had no Bible of my own for I had no money to buy one. My sister, Emily, lent me her King James Version Bible. And I managed to buy a pocket-sized American Standard Version New Testament.

Do I believe that the Bible is the Word of God? No. It contains all the revealed Word of God, but it also is a record of the words of many men, both good and evil, and of Satan.

In explaining that “when you come together, each one has a hymn,” I doubt if Paul was including monotonous and the deaf. They cannot sing. If the tone-deaf gain by mouthing the words monotonously and the deaf are uplifted by signing the words, that is fine. But if they do this supposedly to fulfill a command to sing, they have been misdirected.

I am still puzzled about the virgin birth of Jesus being a sign. A sign is something that can be seen. Was Mary's conduct observed at all times to see that she remained a virgin? Was she examined visually to make determination? Inspired writers tell us she was a virgin by revelation. So, it seems to me, it was a revelation instead of a sign that our belief is based upon.

In our forty-eight years together, Lea and I have owned only one new automobile — a 1947 Plymouth whose monthly payments left us little on which to survive.

One of our elders taught a class which I attended. He stated that he did not condemn other people for their use of instrumental accompaniment in singing. Though I felt the same way, I offered no comment. At the elders' meeting the next night, another elder really got on my case because I did not correct the first elder.

Some of the songs we sing in our assemblies are bucolic in nature. You consider that as a derogatory remark, don't you? It is strange how we attach meanings because of the sound of a word. *Bucolic* simply means pastoral, relating to shepherds or herdsmen.

When I mail up to about eight books, I use padded mailers. Upward to twenty or more are boxed for mailing. When packaging a number between those figures, I encase them in cardboard retrieved from the dumpsters and wrap them in paper. In wrapping those bundles, I have used over a mile of paper. And my wrapping space is less than half the size of a card table.

A pastor of the United Church of Christ in Zambia became a bit too enthusiastic in praise of my writings in declaring, “One can easily mistake your books for a Bible”!

You probably do not understand the story of Joseph in Genesis if you have not read “Divine Providence: Joseph” in *Sermons*, by J. W. McGarvey. The lesson was delivered in 1893.

Are assemblies necessary? Not to fulfill a legal requirement. Yet, God’s people are an interactive, supportive community whose love draws them together in body life. God knows we need each other. To associate only when the group pleases me can be selfish and a display of impatience with God’s family.

Yesterday I dropped in on a big used book sale at our Civic Center. As I browsed, a strange feeling came over me when I saw two of my own books there. I did not buy them! (Maybe the Lord had them there for some special person.)

When they are winning, I like to watch the Dallas Cowboys “play” a “game” of football. But those two words lose their meaning. Since they are paid professionals, it is a *job* that they perform. They *work* an *assignment* called football. What about the professional minister, paid to serve the Lord? Ouch!

Mixing legalism and worship, we made giving money a necessary act of worship. The money given is for the work of the Lord, supposedly. With that money we hire a man to do the work of the Lord. But the paid worker has to give generously out of his income in order to worship and to help support someone to do the work of the Lord. Did I miss something there?

I fear that my image was not enhanced by the grandmother who would bring her grandchildren to the assembly. When they even looked like they might misbehave, she would warn, “You had better watch out; that preacher will git you!”

In 1949 I preached in an evangelistic effort under a tent at Starks, in Calcasieu Parish, Louisiana. It was a good location at the edge of the small town. The closest building was two blocks or more down the street. A honkeytonk. No problem. Except that they had a loudspeaker outside. My listeners had mood music. Over, and over, and over, the juke box blared the raucous, currently popular, “Why Don’t You Haul Off and Love Me One More Time?”!

Maybe you wonder with me as to why God would choose for us to be immersed in water. In many circumstances, there is scarcity of it, not only in arid regions, but in northern areas with their long, frigid winters. Storage of heated water in baptistries is very modern.

You asked about my radio singing career, didn’t you? It began as I sang one song with Grover and Thelma Ross and May Belle Self in Clovis, New Mexico in 1942. To the relief of all concerned, my career as a radio singer ended that same day!

When a preacher or any other kind of salesman begins to try to manipulate me, my resistance stiffens. It is not their publicizing their merchandise that offends; it is their studied method of exploiting the weaknesses of the unwary. They make us feel the need for every imaginable product. Look what we have let them do to Easter, Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas.

Primitive man feared other peoples, disease, starvation, the elements, and superstitions. Modern civilized man has advanced through learning. He only fears other people (foreign and domestic), diseases of many sorts (including fears of his air, water, and food), starvation, the elements, and superstitions causing him to believe the psychics and horoscopes!

### THE CHALLENGE OF THE WRITER

Charles Dickens said it: “To know how to say what other people only think, is what makes men poets and sages; and to dare to say what others only dare to think, makes men martyrs or reformers, or both.”

I could only wish to fit either of those categories mentioned by Dickens. While I recognize that there is little point in restating what others are saying, I also recognize the dearth of original thinking. That includes my postulations.

Sometimes we manage to make ourselves obnoxious enough to create opposition. We may call that persecution and we may gain some prideful satisfaction from it, but it hardly makes us reformers or martyrs.

Many of my readers have commended my “great courage” in speaking out boldly and they have offered words of sympathy because of the abuse that they think I must be enduring. But I often reply, “God knows how insecure I am and of my inability to handle criticism; so he protects me from it!” Friends tell me of opposition that has been aroused by my books in some places, but I receive no more than two or three abusive responses in a year. I make no reply to them.

In 1987 Don Ruhl, of Klamath Falls, Oregon, edited a 200-page book titled, *The Balance of Truth & Freedom*, “A Review of Cecil Hook’s Book, [Free In Christ](#).” It contains chapters written by Art Hitt, Don Michael, Don Ruhl, Greg Weston, Willis Wormuth, and Jack Zieser, all of Oregon, and by Wayne Jackson of California, and by Jerry Moffitt of Texas. As far as I can recall, I have never met any of them or communicated with any of them except to send them 37 free books that they requested and three other books purchased. In return, a complimentary copy of their book was sent to me by mail. Maybe *complimentary* is not the right word!

Lea read the entire book, but I gave up about half way through. It was too sickening. I was all too familiar with their mindset, for I grew up with it before mid-century.

The opposition of those fellows makes no martyr of me. They spelled my name right! The Lord can work all things for an ultimately good purpose. For instance, a Filipino read the book and ordered a copy of my book to learn what I had written. God still opens hearts, and sometimes he even flashes his blinding light on the Damascus Road.

The most common responses that I receive now are expressions like these: “You have answered the questions that I have been asking.” “I have believed those things for a long time but I thought I was the only one who believed that way.” “You have put on paper what I have been thinking.”

The Spirit is working much-needed change among us. My readers are kind and gracious in saying that I am having some part in bringing it about. If I am helping in my little niche from our spare bedroom, it is the Spirit working through me.

### **THE VALUE OF A LIFE**

In our time of confused values, capital punishment has come to be considered as barbaric. Enlightened societies like ours value life too highly to continue that uncivilized treatment of the socially maladjusted, we are told. Because of that and other factors, our society is rapidly becoming uncivilized and barbaric so that the lives of the innocent are valued less than those of violent and murderous men. The absence of sure and just punishment favors the criminal and undermines society.

God once dealt with Israel as a nation. He made their code of civil law. The Law of Moses made no provision for prisons. No person was sentenced to the torture of prison. The offender was punished quickly. The murderer was killed immediately by the next of kin, the avenger of blood. For some infractions like adultery, the guilty were stoned to death. A thief breaking in could be killed without guilt by the homeowner. Restitution up to four or five fold was made for stealing and other sins of liability. Some infractions drew beatings limited to forty stripes. The law demanded that the punishment fit the crime, requiring an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, etc. A person chose his own punishment by choosing the crime to commit.

That system solved the prison overcrowding problem!

Look how cheap that made life, you may counter. But when a thief knew that the property owner had the right to kill him, it was not the property owner, but God, who set the value of the life. The thief chose whether the coveted possession was worth the risk of his life. A couple lusting for each other, knowing that their unlawful act merited stoning, would consider the adulterous violation worth the risk of their lives. No one could blame the law or society for unjustly punishing them when they were stoned to death.

When people declare that capital punishment is barbaric, they presume more wisdom than God who gave the law. And Paul tells us that the civil government bears not the sword (of execution) in vain.

The relaxation of swift and equitable punishment for crimes sends the wrong message to the greedy, lustful, hateful, and violent. We see the dire effects. The innocent citizen of our land who escapes the random violence lives in fear for life and property, and his right of self-protection is taken away. I fear that our nation no longer has the moral fiber to turn back to sure and just punishment. A dreadful time of anarchy, which is as bad or worse than totalitarianism, may lie ahead.

### **SEEING OURSELVES AS OTHERS SEE US**

If I remember my English literature correctly, the Scottish poet, Robert Burns was sitting behind a woman in church who was dressed out in her Sunday best when he observed a louse crawling

about on her beautiful hat. That should inspire most anyone to become poetic; so he wrote a poem! In his *To A Louse*, he wrote:

“Oh wad some power the giftie gie us  
To see oursels as others see us!  
It wad frae monie a blunder free us,  
And foolish notion.”

In my earlier years I was painfully timid, and I have never outgrown my feelings of insecurity. Because I could not endure the thought of being the object of jest or criticism, my tendency was toward perfectionism, though I never had the talent for it! This fostered a self-righteous feeling in me.

Our egos allow us to think highly of ourselves while we have lice crawling on our hats of pride. In a humiliating process of maturing, we learn that we are not right on everything. We must learn to accept the fact that others see our inconsistencies.

I proofread my first book with greatest diligence. It would be flawless! But after it was printed, I learned in dismay that a person cannot depend upon proofreading his own material. He cannot see all of his own mistakes. Now I do not dare to publish anything without the criticism of others who are qualified to discern.

It is fitting here to express appreciation again to Brian Casey of Wilmington, Delaware. We met briefly in 1988 in Houston, and he volunteered to do proofreading for me. It is to my great benefit that he can see my typographical errors, my bad grammar, my misconstructured sentences, and other deficiencies. And I would be most foolish to ignore his criticisms.

As I complete each essay, I strive for perfection, and I think that Brian will find nothing in it needing correction. But it comes back with red all over it!

It is like that in all aspects of life. We are not perfect. Our realization of that will soften our dogmatic declarations, put an end to our prideful posturing, and wash the arrogance from our faces. Other people can see lice crawling all over our pride, our dogmatism, and our claims to the key of knowledge.

If Burns had seen the louse on a poor, shabbily dressed woman who made no pretensions, he probably would have given little notice.

Paul punctures our ego, declaring, “If any one imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know” (1 Cor. 8:2). The more pompously pious we are, the more obvious our lice of ignorance become. And, as they are pointed out to us, it is healthy for us to laugh at our own inconsistencies rather than to become defensive or arrogant.

“Oh would some power the gift give us to see ourselves as others see us!”

## BAPTISMAL VARIABLES

Because baptism is such a solemn and meaningful ritual, it is only to be expected that there would be some human slips and scruples which would threaten its dignity.

Perhaps, you have heard of instances before we had indoor baptistries of persons breaking the ice of a stream in order to be baptized. I am glad that I was not a participant in such, for cold water is not my thing. More recently, I baptized a teenaged girl in our heated baptistry. When I say heated, I mean heated! For some reason, it had overheated. Wearing rubber waders, I did not realize how hot it was until it was too late and I had almost put her through the scalding vat.

Before the time of scientifically treating water to keep it clear in our baptistries, they would develop an ugly scum in a few days. I learned that it helped to add some chlorine bleach. After a boy wondered why his eyes burned so badly after his baptism, I realized that I had used a lot where it should have been a little.

In performing his first baptism, a young friend failed to submerge the woman completely. After the curtain was closed, and without the knowledge of the audience, he immersed her completely. One preacher, convinced that he should say “for the remission of sins” in his ceremony, forgot to say those words. So he immersed her again likewise after the curtain was drawn. Would that be double baptism, or double dipping?

Sometimes religion becomes a contest between a disagreeing husband and wife. That seemed to prevail in a recent case in which the wife kept haranguing her reluctant husband to be baptized. One morning while he was out alone on an errand, he came by for me to baptize him without giving her the joy of witnessing it, and perhaps gloating with an “I won” attitude.

No doubt, in our Stone-Campbell Movement, some women must have already performed baptisms. But for the record, Phillip Morrison tells us in *Wineskins* (Vol. 2, No. 1) of Irina KuliZade, formerly of Azerbaijan, being immersed by Joan Randolph at the Woodmont Hills building in Nashville. Can any one forbid the water that she should not baptize?

Some of this I have related to you before. In the farm community in which I grew up, the church built a concrete baptistry out behind the building. The fire department filled it for our summer meetings. For some strange reason, people did not need baptism at other times! Many people were immersed there including the five siblings of my family. For the sake of modesty, the females were draped with sheets as they came out of the water. Because the water came so near the top, it was not unusual for some water to splash out. The baptismal scene always drew the attention of the kids who were generally well-behaved. But it too much for them when a pitifully obese woman was submerged, sending a tide of water splashing over the sides.

My first baptism was at Milnesand, New Mexico in a surface tank (pond to you Yankees and other foreigners). The water was only about two feet deep, but the extra foot of mud in the bottom helped the depth problem. As it was in that tank and in many of our slimy baptistries whose water looked like a marsh pool ready to hatch tadpoles, I agree that it is “not the putting away of the filth of the flesh!”

Across the state line near Milnesand at Bledsoe, Texas I met my second baptismal challenge. The fellow outweighed me by about one hundred pounds. We climbed into a storage tank by a windmill for the ritual. The water came up almost to my chin. Who could ask for a better arrangement? But almost in panic I soon learned that his buoyancy was so much greater than mine that I had little weight to put him under. I almost climbed on top of him to submerge him.

Someone told how that one person, on arising from his burial, signed himself with a cross — in a Church of Christ! Others have startled our sedate people by shouting.

A brother brought a wayfaring man to be baptized one night in Louisiana. It was very cold. After my immersing him, he continued to splash the warm water upon himself in an impromptu bath. As it turned out, he only wanted a ride to another city eighty miles away.

There have been some “surprise baptisms,” though it may not be known if they were fully immersed. I have heard numerous stories of persons who were assisting in preparations for a baptism falling into the baptistry with a big splash. One of our buildings in Fort Worth was broken into in a frigid night twenty or more years ago. Evidently, in his groping through the building in the dark, the pilferer fell into the chilling baptistry. Too bad that no one was present to laugh. There were interesting conjectures as to how he got home that cold night in soaked clothing. Do you suppose he might have concluded that the Lord was teaching him something about stealing from a church?

In New Iberia, Louisiana a visiting preacher brought eight or ten children from across town to be baptized in our baptistry. The poor fellow was sincere but illiterate. It was a picnic! The children, mostly under ten years old, I would guess, thought it was fun. The man did not know how to hold the candidate so as to restrain the hands. So, as he would start to put them under the water, they would yell and start threshing the water with their arms, much to the delight of the onlookers. He never got one of them under the water completely. What was I to do? In my youthful perplexity, I decided to let the Lord handle the matter knowing that he would understand any sincere purpose.

In that same baptistry, I immersed a man. That was not unusual except that this fellow smelled strongly of intoxicating beverage. He was trying to please his wife, I fear, instead of trying to please the Lord. Anyway, I sort of felt that the Lord took care of the situation for, as I lowered him backward, he lurched strongly, bumping his head hard against the baptistry. Rather than him going on his way rejoicing, he went away rubbing a large knot on the top of his head.

Have you ever witnessed a tandem baptizing? I may be ahead of you there. When I was a teenager on the farm, some of the Holiness people were having a big revival with lots of responses. They brought them all to our neighbor’s watering trough to be immersed. Two of the candidates would be made to stand side by side with one arm around each other. Then two baptizers would hold their arms, one on each side, and immerse them together.

My favorite baptism story was told to me nearly fifty years ago by W. B. Andrews. This young preacher led a woman out into a river with some caution and apprehension for the baptizing. He was slight in stature compared to the woman. As he was getting ready to immerse her, she

looked down on him and growled in an undertone, “You had better not drown me, you little devil!”

### **THE LONGEST DAY**

Fundamentalists are very defensive about the length of the “six days of creation.” To them the admission that the days were indefinite periods of time would open the door for evolutionary theories. Others also accept that they were twenty-four hour days but give them the “thousand years as a day” interpretation, relating them to so-called “end-time prophecies.” Using Usher’s chronology, they would project us to the seventh and last thousand years of time.

Having completed his work of creation, God rested on the seventh day (Gen. 2:1f). He hallowed that day making it a day of rest, a Sabbath, a ceasing, a desisting. Was it also a day of twenty-four hours? No. Using Usher’s chronology, it began in 4004 B.C. and God is still resting from his work of creation.

God has wanted his people to enter into that rest with him. The Fourth Chapter of Hebrews deals with this. Israel was prevented from entering that rest by their unbelief and disobedience. “For we who have believed enter that rest” (v. 3). It is further declared, “So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God; for whoever enters God’s rest also ceases from his labors as God did from his. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest...” (v. 911).

That Sabbath is an eternal day of rest with God. There is no way to harmonize the concept of twenty-four hour days in Genesis 1 and 2. One of them is eternally durative.

Even the most ardent literalist does not accept all of the creation account literally. And there is no profit in trying.

The account of creation is not meant to be a lesson in science. Instead, it is theological. It points all mankind to an infinite and almighty Creator.

### **A NEW KING THAT KNEW NOT JOSEPH**

In his plan to make a great nation of Israel, God made Joseph to become a powerful ruler in Egypt. Living in a climate of governmental favor enabled the descendants of Jacob to multiply and prosper. But they were to enter another phase of development after the death of Joseph.

“Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph” (Exo. 1:8). Becoming threatened by the growing power of the Israelites, the new Pharaoh brought rigorous oppression against them. We tend to think of that as being bad, but God was still in charge of developing his people. “The more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied” (v. 12).

Their oppression helped them to define who they were and what their purposes were. It made them a separate people instead of one integrated into Egyptian society. They were not just another people, but they were God’s people.

These considerations lead us to question the role of civil governments in helping or hindering the Christian religion. Some of these thoughts come from a taped lesson of Dr. Robert Hooper.

Jesus introduced the gospel into the fertile soil of the vast Roman Empire. As it took root and spread, the disciples met with severe persecutions. The populace did not accept Jesus because it was the popular thing to do. Oppressions helped to keep the purposes and professions defined and unpolluted by compromises within a favorable society. The disciples had something worth dying for. This pure form of Christianity was so appealing that no persecutions could stop it. The more God's new people were oppressed, the more they multiplied.

Seeing that his empire was being overrun by disciples in the Fourth Century, Constantine must have decided that he needed those people on his side. So he relaxed the persecutions, made laws favoring Christians, had his army to be baptized, and built buildings for worship. How great it was to have governmental favor and support! Or was it?

Being a follower of Christ became the "in thing." No longer was it demanding and defining. Christianity could, and did, blend with society and paganism. Forms and professions and the keeping of church laws began to replace a true identity with Christ. A vast system of organized religion developed. The entire population of "Christian" countries was claimed by the church.

When Constantine let Christians become a political force, he was giving "a leg up" into the saddle. With the development of the hierarchy and papacy, the church mounted into the saddle and began to rule the empire. It became the "Holy Roman Empire." So that which began as a governmental favor led to the great apostasy.

Although we in America have prohibited a state religion, we have enjoyed governmental favor. That has been a mixed bag of blessing and curse. It has fostered nominal discipleship. It has always been more favorable in our society to profess discipleship than to denounce it. The purposes and definition of discipleship have become vague. But now that is changing.

A new king has arisen who knows not Joseph. Government laws restrict Christianity in our land. In our societal institutions all kinds of religion may be taught except Christianity. The media, entertainers, artists, musicians, and talk show hosts are becoming more brazen in ridiculing Christian people. The image of the disciple is horribly blurred offering no sure definition or purpose. Already a person is shouted down for denouncing sexual immorality, dissolution of the family, homosexual practices, abortion, pornography, profanity, drunkenness, and salvation other than through Christ.

This is a discouraging picture, but don't give up. God is still working. He will refine and define his people. It may take a new era of persecution to do it. Our children and grandchildren may have to step forward as martyrs. The fires of persecution may burn into a revival of true discipleship in the Twenty-First Century. In the flames, the true image of Christ will appear again as in the early centuries. When people see him as he is, they will fall before him as before. Christ will conquer without the favor of our civil governments and societies.

Let us gain comfort from this realization. Let us prepare our generation for the perils ahead. Let us pray that their faith will be purified by the inevitable refining fires.

### **ONE SIZE FITS ALL**

“God is no respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34). “For God shows no partiality” (Rom. 2:11; Gal. 2:6). Other similar passages would indicate that God’s rules apply equally to all persons. When God makes a demand, law is law! There are no “ifs, ands, or buts” about it. There are no excuses, exceptions, or variations. One size fits all! But it just fits tighter for some than for others.

The universal application of God’s commands allows for no interpretation. So we can determine their violation or neglect and condemn all violators. In doing that, we just let the word of God do the judging, don’t we?

Such an understanding as I have presented is ignorant, stupid, and presumptuous. If I were really trying to be ugly, I might say that it is a usurpation of God’s judgment seat. None of us is willing to apply such judgment without prejudice.

Let me illustrate that with one example. “Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord” (Eph. 5:32). “Likewise you wives, be submissive to your husbands...” (1 Pet. 3:1). There are no “Except” clauses. One size fits all.

If the wife happens to be your daughter, you will allow some exceptions. Her husband beats her regularly and threatens her life. Must she be submissive? He abandons her and will not provide for her and her children. Must she be in subjection? He becomes incestuous. Can she resist him? He becomes despotic and is mentally deranged? Do you tell your daughter that she must still be submissive to him? No, you demand that she leave him, have him jailed, divorce him, or shoot him! You see that even perceived law stretches to allow mercy.

Laws begin to take on elasticity when put into practical application. One size begins to be multi-sized. Why is this true? Because we begin to look for grace rather than the harshness of unbending law. Law is a yoke of bondage. Christ’s yoke is easy and liberating.

God sees individuals. He knows the reason for your every response. He knows the factors that make each of us behave differently from every other person on earth.

Our Creator understands the different emotional responses of males and females, those caused by our genes, hormones, and testosterone.

He knows that we vary greatly in intelligence and that our logic and feeling come from right brain or left brain dominance. He understands our manic depression, paranoia, learning disability, emotional instability, and tendency toward drug dependency. Being deaf, paralytic, or blind, or having chronic headaches, or other physical handicaps affect our responses.

God knows our responses that come from childhood influences: the father/mother role, sexual abuse, physical abuse, lack of cultivated self-esteem, lack of moral training, and spiritual or hedonistic upbringing.

Cultural differences are surely known by God, whether it be our race or national customs, our period of history, our education, or the availability of the Scriptures.

God has never demanded the impossible of anyone. Can one size fit all?

In making your judgments of other people, can you take all the above mentioned factors into consideration? If you try to judge by law, you may think that no understanding of differences is required; so you may have the arrogance to conclude that you can judge all others. How stupid and proud we can be!

Grace and law are incompatible. God's grace is multisized. He takes all things into consideration and offers grace to all who respond according to their abilities. "Mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13).

#### **"AND IN CONCLUSION"**

When the preacher says with finality, "And in conclusion," don't reach for the song book. He may go on another ten minutes!

Thank you for hanging with me to this last page. I hope that my writings have been more a challenge to think than a boredom to read. I do not pretend to have all the answers or a new oracle from God.

One of the disappointments of my life is that I have more questions now at the age of 75 than I had when 25. Integrating each new perspective demands a new look at everything it affects so that new questions arise to be reckoned with.

You might have detected already that I have always been a sort of believing skeptic. It is not my aim to create that kind of skepticism in you except to encourage you to search for more satisfying answers.

Although I am pleased when you agree with me, I can assure you that such is not necessary in order for you to be loved and accepted by both God and me. Fellowship is based upon our having a common Father rather than upon agreeing on doctrinal points.

I remain convinced that our greatest disappointment to our Father is our rejection of others in his family. May God be more merciful to us than we are to one another.