

The Lord's Church: Past, Present, Future

The 1999

POWER



Lectures

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Dedication

This year's lectureship theme, **The Lord's Church: Past, Present, Future**, left us with a very obvious choice for the dedication of the book.

This lectureship would not be possible were it not for the strong leadership and membership of the Southaven church of Christ in the **past**. Moreover, this lectureship would not be possible were it not for the strength of the **present** leadership and membership of the Southaven church of Christ. Finally, we pray that the toil of dedicated members of the **past**, and the efforts of the Southaven church of Christ of the **present**, will insure a strong leadership and membership for the Southaven church of Christ of the **future**. Hence, with this prayer on our lips,

The 1999 POWER lectureship book is dedicated to all of the faithful members of the Southaven church of Christ: past, present and future.



A worship service of the Southaven church of Christ (photo by Bill Pierce)

Acknowledgments

Although this makes the fifth **POWER** lectureship book I have edited, my appreciation has not lessened for the amount of work that goes into producing such a volume. As has been the case with each of the foregoing books, this book is by no means a one-man production.

First, I would like to thank the elders of the Southaven church of Christ, Larry Everson, Bill Pierce, and Coleman Simpson, for their vision and leadership.

Second, thanks to each and every one of the gospel preachers who authored the chapters which make up this lectureship book. Having read the manuscripts that make up this volume, I am certain that all of the hours of research and writing was time well spent. Moreover, it is impossible to discern just how far-reaching the influence of this work will be.

Third, I wish to thank those who labored with me in getting the written material from “point A to point B,” i.e., transferring the material from the different word processors of the 32 different authors into one unified book.

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--B. J. Clarke

Foreword

The purpose of this book is quite simple--to trace the development of the Lord's church from the past into the present, with the aim of preparing it adequately for the future. The first chapter explores the church from God's eternal purpose until the day it was presented on Pentecost. Chapters two and three investigate the tragic apostasy of the church after it was established, and the pathway to restoring the New Testament church.

The next fifteen chapters make up the heart of the book. Each church of the New Testament (which we have any significant information about) is studied with a view to determining its strengths/weaknesses. What did these local churches do right that we, as the Lord's church, can learn from and imitate? On the other hand, the church of today needs to know what some of the churches of the past did wrong so that we do not repeat their errors in the present, nor in the future. As has often been pointed out, if we do not learn from the mistakes of the past, we are doomed to repeat those mistakes. Similarly, the same qualities that made the New Testament churches effective will assist us in our mission as well.

The third segment of the book provides a glimpse of the church as described by some of the various figures employed by the inspired New Testament authors. What does it really mean for the church to be a body, a kingdom, a household, an army, a temple, a vineyard, and a bride?

The last section of the book examines a potpourri of topics related to the Lord's church: its worship, mission, organization, practice of discipline, role of women within the church, misconceptions about the church, the necessity of membership in the church, and ultimately, the future destiny of the church. May the Head of the church be glorified by the influence of this volume!

--B. J. Clarke

Table Of Contents

Chapter 1

The Lord's Church: In Purpose, Prophecy, Preparation and Presentation

David Brown.....11

Chapter 2

What Happened To The Lord's Church?: The Falling Away

B. J. Clarke.....34

Chapter 3

What Does It Mean To Restore The Lord's Church?

Jim Laws.....58

Chapter 4

Lessons From The Church At Jerusalem

Dub McClish.....76

Chapter 5

Lessons From The Church At Antioch

Wayne Cox.....110

Chapter 6

Lessons From The Churches Of Galatia

Darrell Beard.....130

Chapter 7

Lessons From The Church At Thessalonica

Billy Bland.....145

Chapter 8	
Lessons From The Church At Colossae	
<i>David Jones</i>	162
Chapter 9	
Lessons From The Church At Sardis	
<i>Jason Roberts</i>	178
Chapter 10	
Lessons From The Church At Rome	
<i>Keith Mosher, Sr.</i>	193
Chapter 11	
Lessons From The Church At Corinth	
<i>Paul Sain</i>	211
Chapter 12	
Lessons From The Church At Pergamum	
<i>Wayne Jones</i>	236
Chapter 13	
Lessons From The Church At Laodicea	
<i>Victor Eskew</i>	251
Chapter 14	
Lessons From The Church At Thyatira	
<i>Keith Cozort</i>	268
Chapter 15	
Lessons From The Church At Smyrna	
<i>Kevin Beard</i>	284

Chapter 16	
Lessons From The Church At Philadelphia	
<i>Daniel Cates</i>	298
Chapter 17	
Lessons From The Church At Ephesus	
<i>Ted J. Clarke</i>	312
Chapter 18	
Lessons From The Church At Philippi	
<i>Robert R. Taylor, Jr.</i>	366
Chapter 19	
Pictures Of The Church: Body of Christ, Household of God	
<i>Jerry Martin</i>	381
Chapter 20	
Pictures Of The Church: The Army Of God, The Temple Of God, The Kingdom Of God	
<i>Don Walker</i>	397
Chapter 21	
Pictures Of The Church: The Vineyard Of The Lord	
<i>Curtis Cates</i>	414
Chapter 22	
The Lord's Church: The Pure Bride Of Christ	
<i>Garland Elkins</i>	426
Chapter 23	
The Growth Of The Lord's Church: Past, Present, Future	
<i>Bill Bryant</i>	444
Chapter 24	
The Organization Of The Lord's Church: Past, Present, Future	
<i>Bobby Liddell</i>	468

Chapter 25	
The Worship Of The Lord's Church As God Would Have It	
<i>Michael Hatcher</i>	486
Chapter 26	
Innovations In Worship: Past, Present, Future	
<i>Gary Summers</i>	509
Chapter 27	
The Mission Of the Lord's Church: Past, Present, Future	
<i>Michael Light</i>	547
Chapter 28	
The Role Of Women In The Lord's Church: Past, Present, Future	
<i>Tracy Dugger</i>	559
Chapter 29	
Discipline In The Lord's Church: Past, Present, Future	
<i>Glenn Colley</i>	581
Chapter 30	
Some Popular Misconceptions About The Lord's Church: Past, Present, Future	
<i>Toney Smith</i>	592
Chapter 31	
Can One Be Saved Outside Of The Lord's Church?	
<i>James Rogers</i>	608
Chapter 32	
The Future Destiny Of The Lord's Church	
<i>Tom Wacaster</i>	624

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CHAPTER 1

The Lord's Church: In Purpose, Prophecy, Preparation And Presentation

David Brown

Introduction

T^{HE CHURCH AS IT} appears on the pages of the Bible is virtually an unknown entity today. For the most part it is seen through denominational sectarian eyes. Hence, it is considered as nonessential to man's salvation. It is, therefore, subject to the indignities of the men and women who claim to love it, but in reality are some of its greatest enemies. The product of such torturous treatment of the New Testament's teaching regarding the church is a concept that possesses little or no resemblance to the church established by Christ on the first Pentecost following His resurrection from the dead.

In this study we will see that the church that Jesus built and shed His blood to purchase is essential to the salvation of mankind and, thus, purposed by God before the creation. This will be clearly set out as we study the church under the points revealed in the title of this chapter. Let us now begin our study.

God's Eternal Purpose For Christ And His Church

The omniscience of God allowed Him to know that man would sin and need a Savior. Hence, before time and created things, God purposed to save man. The work of Christ in man's salvation and the church's place in that process was no afterthought of God. Of the Christ who built the church Peter declared, "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain" (Acts 2:23). Later, Peter wrote that Christ "was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you" (1 Peter 1:20). To the Christians in Rome, Paul wrote that the Christ was "called according to his purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom. 8:29ff). To the Thessalonian brethren Paul penned: "God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation" (2 Thess. 2:13). To Timothy, Paul wrote: "Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began" (2 Tim. 1:9).

Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus, saying, "According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). Actually verses three through fourteen of this chapter should be read and closely considered. In this passage we have presented to us the great architect of our salvation, God the Father. In Him all authority originally resided (Matt. 28:18). Paul tells us that His eternal purpose enfolds eternity and time. It includes the work of the Godhead. It involves the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile to God and thereby to one another. The church in conflict is set out, and her consummation in the ages to come is revealed. Indeed,

the totality of God's great Scheme of Redemption, of which the church is an integral part, is according to the purpose of God.

Of course, God's purposed plan does not rule out or bypass the will of man. Each accountable person is free to choose the Christ or reject Him. Whether one avails himself of the preplanned salvation (that is found only in Christ via belief and obedience to the Gospel) or rejects it is the individual's decision to make (Mark 16:15-16; Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 4:15; Col. 1:5; Rom. 10:16; 2 Thess. 1:8; Rev. 22:17).

The Importance Of Ephesians 3:8-12 To Our Study

In the midst of this passage of Scripture Paul wrote: "To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God. According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (vv. 10-11). Indeed, the theme of Ephesians could be called the church in God's eternal purpose. The church, therefore, is no "mystery parenthesis." It is at the very core of God's eternal purpose. Nothing about the church was left to chance.

The Unfolding Of The Scheme Of Redemption

From the beginning, in promise and prophecy, God gradually revealed His eternal purpose to save man. When Adam and Eve sinned, their relationship with God was severed (Gen. 2:16-17). God declared to man's archenemy, Satan, "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (3:15). Thus, God foretold of the saving seed of woman. Satan's seed would wound her seed, but it would not be permanent nor thwart the purpose of God in the salvation of man. Indeed, God would inflict a permanent wound upon Satan. Therefore, in the New Testament, the Hebrews writer, in speaking of the work of Christ, penned:

Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil (Heb. 2:14).

In order for the promise of Genesis 3:15 to be accomplished, God chose certain men to play significant parts in the working out of His purpose. Thus, the Scheme of Redemption involved a Messianic Line of descendants (families), a nation, and a tribe.

Genesis eleven reviews the Messianic Line from Noah, through Shem, to Abraham. With Abraham we are introduced to the beginning of the Messianic Nation. After leaving Ur of the Chaldees, Abraham came to Haran. There he received the "Abrahamic covenant" (12:1-3). This is the second great Messianic promise to appear in the Bible.

In response to God's call, from Haran (where his father Terah had died) Abraham journeyed through Canaan into Egypt and back to Canaan. In Canaan, Lot and Abraham separated. It was then that God promised Abraham the land in which he dwelt.

In time, through impatience on the part of Sarah and Abraham, Ishmael was born to Abraham and Hagar, Sarah's handmaid (16:15-16). Twenty-five years after God made His promise to Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son, Isaac was born to them (21:1-3). Following God's test of Abraham's faith and his passing of the same, we are brought to the end of Abraham's life (22:1-19; 25:8).

In the life of Abraham we have presented to us the following two points involving the unfolding of the Scheme of Redemption:

1. God's selection of the head of the Messianic nation, and

2. The making and development of the Abrahamic Covenant.

Isaac's Place In The Purpose Of God

Abraham was one hundred years old and Sarah was ninety when Isaac was born. Sarah died when he was 37 years old. Isaac was forty years old when he left home (Gen. 23).

Isaac's wife, Rebekah, was from "the city of Nahor," Haran. Nahor was the brother of Abraham and grandfather of Rebekah. The city was in Padan-aram, a part of Mesopotamia. "Rebekah" means "a noose" or "a rope with a noose." The idea in her name is that her beauty ensnares men.

In the ongoing development of the Scheme of Redemption we see in the life of Isaac that:

1. He was the son of the promise.
2. He was the first step in developing the Messianic nation.
3. Through Isaac, we are introduced to Jacob.

God's Purpose Involved The Father Of The Heads Of The Twelve Tribes Of Israel

Jacob was Esau's twin. They were born by the well of Beer-lahairoi, near Beer-sheba, to Isaac and Rebekah. Esau was born before Jacob (Gen. 25:21-26). Jealousy and strife existed between the twins primarily because of the favoritism of their parents. Rebekah loved Jacob, and Isaac loved Esau.

At Rebekah's instigation and help, Jacob, by deception, caused Isaac to bless him rather than Esau (ch. 27). When Esau learned what had happened, he was filled with remorse but could not persuade Isaac to change the blessing.

Due to the great anger of Esau and his vow to kill Jacob, Jacob took his mother's advice and fled to her brother Laban (27:43-45). Esau married two Hittite women, who "were a grief of mind unto Isaac and to Rebekah" (26:34-35). Coupled with other matters in Esau's life, we are able to see the weak character of the man.

Following his mother's advice, Jacob traveled "to Padan-aram to the house of Bethuel thy mother's father," and found and married two sisters Leah and Rachel. (Space does not allow for the study of all that transpired with Jacob in the process of his marriage, his return home, and his reconciliation to his brother Esau.)

Following his reconciliation to Esau, God directed Jacob to go to Bethel and build an altar (35:1-8). From Bethel he traveled with his family to Ephrath. On this trip Benjamin was born, and Rachel died in the process thereof (35:16-20).

In Jacob's life God reveals to us:

1. Further development of the Abrahamic Covenant.
2. The introduction to Jacob's twelve sons.
3. Joseph is singled out and studied.

I will not take up the space to tell of the rich and interesting life and times of Joseph. Suffice it to say that the move of Jacob's family to Egypt was necessary because:

1. The nation had to be kept separate and distinct.
2. The tribes had to develop and be kept intact.
3. They also needed to grow into a strong people.
4. In Joseph we see the preservation of the embryonic nation.

5. We also see in Joseph the account of how the Israelites came to be in Egypt.
6. We are introduced to the tribe from which, according to the flesh, the Messiah would come.

This historical account is a wonderful and comforting record of God's providential working among men to preserve His purposed salvation of the human race (37:1—49:10). Hence, the complete book of Genesis reveals the beginning and early development of the unfolding of God's purpose to redeem man. Moreover, God is revealed in the Old Testament as working out His purpose through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the tribe of Judah.

The Nation Of Israel In The Purpose Of God

In time the Israelites in Egypt grew from a small number to a great host (Exod. 1:1-7). Following the death of Joseph, the dynasty of Pharaoh changed. With that change the fortunes of the Israelites changed for the worse. The new Pharaoh made them slaves. Though they were greatly oppressed, they grew even more (1:8-14). Because of this growth, Pharaoh commanded the midwives to kill all the male children at birth (1:15-22). It is at this time we are introduced to Moses (2:1-10; 6:20). Again, space will not allow for the study of Moses' life and the call of God to deliver the Israelites. I shall allow the words of the Hebrews writer to sum up the life of this great servant of God:

By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the

treasures of Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompense of reward (Heb. 11:24-26).

Moses, a type of the Christ, led Israel out of Egyptian bondage and through the wilderness wanderings to the borders of Canaan. Consider the following parallels of Moses and Christ:

1. God sent Moses and Christ.
2. Moses left the riches of Egypt, and Christ left the glories of heaven.
3. The virgin daughter of Pharaoh adopted Moses, and Christ was born of a virgin.
4. Moses escaped the wrath of Pharaoh, and Christ the wrath of Herod.
5. Christ and Moses were Israelites.
6. Their brethren rejected Moses and Christ.
7. Moses and Christ accomplished the work they were chosen to do.
8. Moses and Christ worked miracles to confirm their position.
9. Moses' first miracle turned water into blood, and Christ's first miracle turned water into wine.
10. When the Law of Moses was given, 3000 perished, and, when the Law (Jas. 1:25) of Christ was first preached in its fullness, 3000 were saved.
11. Moses and Christ were transfigured.
12. Moses and Christ offered themselves to die for God's people (Exod. 32:32; John 10:17).
13. Moses actually married a Gentile woman, and Christ figuratively married Gentiles in His church.
14. Moses lifted up the serpent in the

wilderness as a figure of Christ, and Christ was lifted up on His cross.

15. Through Moses the people received bread, and Christ is the true bread of life.

16. Moses by God's direction built the tabernacle, and Christ built God's House, the church.

17. Moses was mediator of the Old Testament, and Christ is the one mediator of the New Testament.

18. Moses delivered Israel from physical slavery, and Christ delivers us from slavery to sin.

19. God, through Moses, by water, saved Israel from Pharaoh, and God through Christ saves all men through the waters of baptism (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16; Rom. 6:3-4; Col. 2:12; Gal. 3:26-27; 1 Pet. 3:21).

King David And God's Eternal Purpose

God declared through His prophet to David:

Also the Lord telleth thee that he will make thee an house. And when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with they fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom...He shall build an house for my name, and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be his father, and he shall be my son. If he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men (2 Sam. 7:11-14).

Of the tribe of Judah was David. God's purpose would be worked out through David; for Christ would occupy

the throne of David to rule over His spiritual kingdom. Thus, this prophecy of Samuel is fulfilled in Christ by the seed of David according to the flesh (Rom. 1:3). The purpose of God is not thwarted.

Isaiah reveals the Messiah to be born of a virgin (Isa. 7:14; Matt. 1:23). Upon His shoulder would the government of the church rest. He would be called "Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6). From Isaiah's prophecy we learn that Christ would possess "the key of David" (ch. 22). With equity and might Christ would reign over His kingdom (11:1-11).

In Jesus of Nazareth all of the promises and predictive elements of prophecy pertaining to Messiah were fulfilled. In speaking to Mary of the coming birth of Christ, the angel said:

He shall be great and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end (Luke 1:32-33).

Therefore, Luke records Peter declaring on the Day of Pentecost:

Men and brethren, let me freely speak unto you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his sepulchre is with us unto this. Therefore being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, he would raise up Christ to sit on his throne (Acts 2:29-30).

Hence, in Jesus and His church the eternal purpose comes to fruition. Our Lord is the preeminent one in God's

purpose. The purpose of God was to “sum up all things in Him” (Eph. 1:9-10). Therefore, it is no wonder that the church is revealed as “the fullness of him that filleth all in all” (1:23).

The Church In Prophecy

Though we have examined certain prophetic elements in the development of the purpose of God, let us now focus more closely on prophecies of the church. Eight of the fourteen writing prophets wrote of the church. Joel, Amos, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, and Zechariah revealed the church in symbols and figures.

If not the earliest, Joel was one of the earliest writing prophets. He wrote of the beginning of the church with a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Joel 2:29). On the Day of Pentecost, regarding the events then transpiring and awing the people, the apostle Peter declared, “This is that which hath been spoken of by the prophet Joel” (Acts 2:16).

Amos saw the church as the restored tabernacle of David:

In that day will I raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and close up the breaches thereof; and I will raise up his ruins, and I will build it as in the days of old: that they may possess the remnant of Edom, and of all the heathen, which are called by my name, saith the Lord that doeth this (Amos 9:11).

Israel was well-aware of their divided state. Amos saw the time when that breach would be healed. He saw a restored nation proceed to possess the remnant of Edom and all other nations who are called by the name of the Lord. James declared the fulfillment of Amos’ prophecy when he quoted Amos 9:11-12:

Men and brethren, hearken unto me: Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things (Acts 15:13-17).

At the time that James uttered the previously quoted words, the church had already been established. The breaches between Judah and Israel were no more. With the conversion of Cornelius and his household, the Gentiles were coming into the church. Thus, the restored tabernacle of David was and is the church of Christ.

Isaiah and Micah revealed the church of our Lord as a house established in the top of the mountains and exalted above the hills. Each prophet wrote:

And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem (Isa. 2:2-3; Mic. 4:1-2).

We read from the pen of Paul these words to Timothy, telling him that the "house of God...is the church of the

living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). Isaiah’s words “established in the top of the mountains” meant that the church would occupy the most exalted position of any institution in the world. There would be a steady flow of people (Jew and Gentile) into God’s House, the church of Christ. The phrase “many people shall go and say” means that a zealous program of evangelism would characterize the Lord’s House. God’s teaching us His ways simply means that the church teaches itself regarding godly living.

Scanning the book of Isaiah, we see the prophet revealing a number of facts regarding the church. Some of them I will now list:

1. ***It would be a nation of peace*** (Isa. 2:4; Mic. 4:3).
2. ***God would give a memorial in His house, the Lord’s Supper*** (Isa. 56:5; Mark 14:22-25; Matt. 26:26-29; Luke 22:14-20). Isaiah wrote:

And it shall come to pass that from one new moon to another, and from one sabbath to another (once each week, DB) all flesh shall come to worship before me, saith the Lord (Isa. 66:23).

3. ***An everlasting name would be given within the Lord’s house: that name is the word “Christian.”***
Isaiah penned:

For Zion’s sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth. And the Gentiles shall see thy righteousness, and all kings thy glory: and thou shalt be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord shall name (62:1-2).

Notice that the emphasis in this passage is on the fact that the new name would not be given until the Gentiles were brought into God's house. Regardless of the many designations for the Lord's people, individually and collectively, the fact of the matter is that the only formal name that was given by Divine edict is the name "Christian" (Acts 11:26).

4. ***Isaiah also saw that eunuchs would be authorized to enter into God's house*** (Isa. 56:3). The Law of Moses did not allow a eunuch to enter the assembly of God (Deut. 23:1). In the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch we see this prohibition removed in the Gospel of Christ. The eunuch was welcomed into the house of God.

5. ***Isaiah also beheld all nations and languages coming into the house of God*** (Isa. 66:18-21; also see 1 Pet. 2:9-10).

The prophet Jeremiah pictured the Lord's church as a new covenant written on the hearts of men (Jer. 31:31-33). The Jews knew that the Law of Moses had to be changed if the high priest was to change. Therefore, in emphasizing the place of the New Testament in the purpose of God, the Hebrews writer quoted Jeremiah.

But now hath he obtained a more excellent ministry, by how much also he is the mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the second. For finding fault with them, he saith, Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they continued not in my covenant, and I

regarded them not, saith the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them on their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people (Heb. 8:6-10).

Daniel reminded Nebuchadnezzar of his dream and interpreted it for him (Dan. 2:31-35). He interpreted the different materials of the image to be different kingdoms. Of course, he is not listing all the kingdoms of the world that ever existed or ever would exist. The image is comprised of materials that represent the kingdoms existing before the time that God established His kingdom, ending with the establishment of our Lord's kingdom and its duration. Daniel declared:

1. The head of gold is the Babylonian Empire (2:37-38).
2. The breast and arms of silver is the Medo-Persian Kingdom (2:39).
3. The belly of brass and its thighs represented the Grecian Empire (2:39).
4. The legs of iron and feet part of iron and part of clay are the Roman Empire (2:40-43).

Daniel declared that, in the days of the fourth kingdom (the Roman Empire), the God of heaven shall set up a kingdom that would last forever. Daniel beheld a small stone cut out of a mountain without human involvement. He watched the stone grow and fill the whole earth.

The Lord's church began on the first Pentecost following the resurrection and ascension of Christ (Acts 2).

Comparatively, it was a small entity. However, in approximately five centuries, even while apostasy developed within its ranks, the church, through the Gospel, conquered Rome.

Ezekiel, who did his work with the captives in Babylon, saw the church as a sheepfold. It had one shepherd over it. That shepherd was David (Ezek. 34:11,22-23). Our Lord said of himself, "I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine. As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10:14-15). Hence, the Son of David, Jesus Christ, fulfilled Ezekiel's vision pertaining to the one sheepfold and the one shepherd.

Zechariah viewed the Lord's church as a temple and an open fountain. During the days of the restoration of the Jews to Judah, the temple was rebuilt. However, for a time the work on the temple ceased. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah stirred up the people, the governor, and the high priest to resume the work on the temple. Zechariah particularly exhorted the governor, Zerubbabel (Zech. 4:7,9). It was within this context that God declared to Zechariah:

And speak unto him, saying, Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, saying, Behold the man whose name is The BRANCH; and he shall grow up out of his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord: Even he shall build the temple of the Lord; and he shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon his throne; and he shall be a priest upon his throne: and the counsel of peace shall be between them both (6:12-13).

Briefly summarized, the passage reveals that the Branch, Christ, would sit ruling on His throne, while at the same time serving as a priest. Thus, the Hebrews

writer recorded: “Whither the forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus, made an high priest forever after the order of Melchisedec” (Heb. 6:20). Hence, when Christ began to sit and rule, He would be a priest. Peter declared that Christ was sitting and ruling (Acts 2:29-36). Therefore, He also began his priestly work at that time.

Also, Zechariah announced that the church was as open fountain: “In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness” (Zech. 13:1). When Zechariah saw the fountain, it was not open. However, it would open “in that day” (at a certain time and place in the future). It would be opened “for sin and for uncleanness.” It would not be for the cleansing of the body, but for the cleansing of sin from the soul (Eph. 5:26; Acts 22:16; 1 Cor. 6:11; 1 Pet. 3:21; Rev. 1:5).

The emphasis of the prophets, who, by the Holy Spirit, looked down through the stream of time to see the church, was done through figures of speech and symbols familiar to them and the people to whom they spoke. Joel’s “outpouring” or overwhelming, such as that of a storm, was familiar to the people. Amos’ “tabernacle” was a common thought to the people. Isaiah and Micah’s “house” was another familiar term. Jeremiah’s “covenant” was a routinely used concept in Israel. Ezekiel’s “sheepfold” and “shepherd” were everyday sights in the land of Israel. Zechariah’s “temple” was a word that found common usage in the vocabulary of the Jews. His “fountain” was also familiar and very important in the dry and arid land of Palestine.

The Church In Preparation

Let us begin our study of this section by noticing the work of John the Immerser relative to the preparation of

the Lord's church. Malachi prophesied of John's work when he declared:

Behold I will send Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers (Mal. 4:5-6).

Of John, Jesus said, "And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come (Matt. 11:14). In this same passage of Scripture, Jesus commented on the work of John when He said, "For this is he of whom it is written, behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare the way before thee" (11:10). Mark added the following words to the prophecy about John, "the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (Mark 1:1-3). It should be clear in the mind of all serious Bible students that John could not prepare the people to receive the Christ without preparing them to receive the Christ's church/kingdom—premillennialism notwithstanding.

Of John the Baptizer, Jesus said to the people:

What went ye out into the wilderness for to see? A reed shaken with the wind? But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? Behold, they which are gorgeously apparelled, and live delicately, are in king's courts. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet. This is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee (Luke 7:24-27).

Jesus also prepared the people for the church. This He was doing when he cried out, "Repent: for the kingdom

of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 4:17). From His baptism until His death on the cross, everything Christ did was preparatory to the church; for He came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). The means whereby He would save the sinner was through the church He built and purchased with His own blood (Acts 2; 20:28).

In order to prepare the people for the Christ and His church, John the Immerser had to effect a genuinely penitent state of mind (Matt. 3:8). Thus, his message and that of Christ was one of repentance.

Having repented and submitted to baptism for the remission of their sins (Mark 1:4), the people were prepared to receive instruction regarding the church. To live in the church correctly implies living according to God’s will. Repentance must precede godly living (Tit. 2:11-12). As Paul penned, “For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness” (Rom. 14:17). All of God’s commandments are righteousness (Psm. 119:172). Thus, having obeyed “that form of doctrine” we become servants (bond slaves) to righteousness (the commandments of God) (Rom. 6:17-18; 6:3-4; Col. 2:12).

Christ, in the Sermon on the Mount, further prepared the people for the church. Therein is revealed the humility, righteousness, purity, love, faith, and obedience necessary for one to be pleasing to God (Matt. 5-7).

John and Jesus set out the importance of truth being the key to understanding salvation (Matt. 11:1-6; 14:1-12; John 1:1-34). They pointed out that truth is absolute, objective, and humanly attainable; that it is the source of salvation and the only authority for the church (John 8:32; 14:6; Mark 7:7-8,13; John 17:17). John and Jesus demonstrated that one should give up his life rather than compromise the truth (Matt. 14:1-12). Each one taught that believing a lie will cost men their souls (15:14).

John and Jesus taught the people that the kingdom of heaven was not physical, but spiritual. Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36-37), thereby further refuting the false doctrine of a material, premillennial kingdom.

Jesus promised His apostles power from the Holy Spirit to teach them all things and to bring all things to their remembrance regarding what He had taught them during His earthly ministry (John 14:26). They would record the proofs of Jesus' Deity (20:30-31). Their Holy Spirit-inspired doctrine would be the teaching tenaciously followed by the church (Acts 1:2-8; 2:1ff; 2:42). Thus, the apostles had a unique position in the church.

John and Jesus were successful in their endeavors to prepare the people for the coming church. Again, though their enemies killed John and Jesus, God's purpose was not hindered or impeded.

The Presentation Of The Purposed Church

Notice that Paul declared the church to be "throughout all ages, world without end" (Eph. 3:10-11, 21). Thus, we understand that God set the destiny of His purposed church. God preplanned the church of Christ to live on in a glorified state with Him in heaven (1 Pet. 1:20).

By what Jesus has done for us (that we could never do for ourselves) those who are faithful to His cause have the expectation of eternal life in heaven (Rom. 8:24-25; Rev. 2:10). Only "they that are accounted worthy to obtain that world, and the resurrection from the dead" (Luke 20:35) will partake of life everlasting (Rev. 3:4). Consider the following types of the church presented to God by Christ:

1. *When man sinned his access to the tree of life was stopped.* In heaven the church will once again have access to it so that we may partake of it and live forever

(Rev. 2:7). On each side of the river of life was the tree of life, bearing twelve fruits, yielding its fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations (Rev. 22:1-2). Hence, the tree of life of the Garden of Eden is a figure of eternal life available only to those who reach heaven.

2. *The faithful are pictured as receiving the crown of life in heaven.* This “crown” (Greek *stephanos*) is the badge of those who died faithful. It is indicative of victory. Peter said this is a crown of glory that will not fade (1 Pet. 5:4). Paul expected that crown of life in the heavenly kingdom. He was positive that it awaited him (2 Tim. 4:8).

3. *God gave the wandering Israelites “manna” to eat.* It had the taste of wafers made with honey (Num. 11:9; Exod. 16:31). In a figure “manna” represented the heavenly food on which the redeemed would live. John, the apostle, by inspiration, called it “manna” (Rev. 2:17).

Other symbols are used by the Holy Spirit to picture the eternal blessedness of the church of Christ in heaven:

1. *A white stone* (Rev. 2:17). A white stone signified “not guilty” in a Roman court (Rom. 8:1).

2. *White garments* (Rev. 3:5). God reckons our obedient faith for righteousness and thereby our garments are made white in the blood of the lamb. Thus, we are pictured in white in our glorified state (Tit. 3:5; Zech. 13:1; 1 Cor. 6:11; Rev. 1:5; Rom. 6:3).

3. *The book of life* (Rev. 20:12; 22:12). To be in the book of life is more important than working miracles (Luke 10:20). Faithful Christians’ names are written in the book of life (Phil. 4:3). The Hebrews writer declared that the church made up of the firstborn persons is enrolled in heaven (Heb. 12:23).

4. *The bride of Christ* (Rev. 18:23; Eph. 5:25-26). The Christian is married to Christ, Who raised him from

the dead (Rom. 7:4). Thus, we do not have “spot or wrinkle or any such thing” (Eph. 5:27). The anticipated glory in heaven motivates the bride to live so as to enjoy eternal bliss in the new heavens and new earth wherein dwells righteousness (2 Pet. 3:13-14).

Conclusion

The apostle Paul discussed the presentation of the church to God when he wrote:

Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. For he hath put all things under his feet. But when he saith all things are put under him, it is manifest that he is excepted, which did put all things under him. And when all things shall be subdued unto him, then shall the son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all (1 Cor. 15:24-28).

What all God has in store for us in the land of fadeless day I do not know. However, I do know that I cannot be a part of it unless I am presented to God when Christ delivers up the kingdom to His Father. Furthermore, I understand that I must be a faithful member of the church in order to be delivered up to the Father at the end of this world.

In order to partake of the tree of life, wear the crown of life, eat the spiritual manna, drink from the river of life, receive the white stone of acquittal, wear the white garments of heaven, have my name written in the Lamb's book of life, and enjoy the consummation of the bride of

Christ, I must be “stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58).

Indeed, “heaven is a prepared place for a prepared people.” This means that I must be a faithful member of the church of Christ all the days of my life. Then I shall be presented to God with all other faithful members of the body of Christ to do His bidding to perfection for all eternity. God has purposed that one must be faithful in the church of Christ in order to go to heaven. The Bible reveals the purpose of God for the church. Men may oppose it, but the purpose for the church is the same today as when it only existed in the mind of God in eternity. Let us rejoice in the immutable God of Glory and His never changing system of salvation, which includes the church that is of (and by) the Christ to the glory of God the Father and the salvation of the souls of faithful obedient men.

CHAPTER 2

What Happened To The Lord's Church? The Falling Away

B. J. Clarke

Introduction

BEFORE GOD EVER SAID “let there be light” (Gen. 1:3), He had, in His mind, already said, “let there be a church” (Eph. 3:9-11; 1 Pet. 1:20; Acts 20:28). As the Old Testament story unfolded, numerous prophecies predicting the coming of the church were recorded by inspired prophets of God (Gen. 3:15; 12:1-3; 2 Sam. 7:12ff; Isa. 2:1-4; Dan. 2; Micah 4:1-4). The ministry of John the Immerser, in accordance with the prophecy of Isaiah, prepared the way for the Lord by proclaiming that the time for the arrival of His church/kingdom was drawing ever closer (Isa. 40:3-5; Matt. 3:1ff).

Even Jesus began traveling around the region of Galilee, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 4:17). After calling the twelve apostles, He dispatched them on a mission to go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, saying, “And as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 10:7). He sent out the seventy, instructing them to tell their hearers, “The kingdom of God is come nigh unto you” (Luke 10:9). In fact, the coming of the kingdom was so near that Jesus

promised some that they would not die until they had seen the kingdom come with power (Mark 9:1). Just prior to His ascension Jesus commanded His disciples to tarry in Jerusalem until they received power from on high (Luke 24:49). This power would come upon the apostles after the Holy Spirit came upon them (Acts 1:8).

The actual presentation of the church, therefore, occurred on the day when the power of the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the apostles. According to Scripture, that day was the “day of Pentecost” (Acts 2:1-47). With multitudes gathered in Jerusalem, “from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5), the apostles were empowered by the Holy Spirit to speak fluently in languages they had never studied (Acts 2:1-4). This phenomenon captured the attention of the multitudes and convinced them that the apostles were genuine spokesmen for Jehovah (Acts 2:6-8).

Having the full attention of the crowd, Peter (and the other apostles) preached the first gospel sermon, indicting the Jews for slaying the very Son of God (Acts 2:14-36). Some were so convicted by the message that they cried out “unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). The immediate reply from Peter commanded them to repent and be baptized for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38). In response, “they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls...and the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:41, 47). Hence, the church of our Lord, which had been eternally **purposed** by God, **prophesied** of by the prophets, **prepared** for by John, Jesus, the apostles and other disciples, was finally **presented** on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). The thrilling **progress** of the early church is recorded throughout the remainder of the book of Acts.

It would be wonderful to end this chapter on the high note of the presentation and progress of the Lord’s church, as revealed in the early portion of the book of Acts. However,

as Paul Harvey might say, you need to know “the rest of the story.” What happened to the Lord’s church after its glorious establishment and early success? Is the story of the Lord’s church one of perpetual growth and faithfulness to God, or does history tell another story?

The tragic truth of the matter is that the Lord’s church did not exist very long before the problem of apostasy reared its ugly head. My task, in this lesson, is to examine the apostasy, i.e., the falling away of the Lord’s church. The plan for investigation is as follows: 1) The **Prediction** of apostasy; 2) The **Proof** of the apostasy; 3) The **Protest** against the apostasy; 4) The **Proliferation** of apostasy and 5) The **Prescription** to cure apostasy.

The Prediction Of The Apostasy

Numerous warnings of a coming apostasy were sounded forth in the Scriptures. Consider two of these passages:

Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, **to draw away disciples** after them (Acts 20:28-30, emp. mine throughout, BJC).

Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him, That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand. Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, **except**

there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; (2 Thess. 2:1-3).

The first text is the record of Paul's farewell speech to the Ephesian elders, with whom he had worked for three years (Acts 20:31). This emotional scene was made all the more emotional by Paul's inspired realization that the church he had labored with so fervently and tenderly was headed for apostasy. Moreover, the apostasy would be initiated by some who, from within the eldership, would "draw away disciples."

The second passage is from Paul's second letter to the church at Thessalonica. An overview of the books of First and Second Thessalonians indicates that, notwithstanding the vast amount of teaching the Thessalonians had received on the subject, both oral and written, they still possessed a seriously flawed misunderstanding of the Second Coming of Christ. Their misunderstanding was so serious that some of them had ceased evidently their daily work and become idle and disorderly. Thus, the central purpose of the passage was to correct the misconceptions of the Thessalonian brethren regarding the time of the Second Coming of Christ.

Paul beseeches the Thessalonians not to be "soon shaken in mind, or be troubled." Evidently, their misunderstanding of the Second Coming had affected them emotionally. They were shaken in mind and troubled. The word for "shaken" in this verse is the same word used in Acts 16:26 to describe the shaking of the foundations of the Philippian prison. Its use in the New Testament always connotes a violent shaking. Hence, Paul exhorts them to keep their mental balance. Paul's wish for the Thessalonians was that they be unshaken by the winds of false doctrine blowing their way.

To correct their misconception that the Second Coming of Christ was imminent, Paul points to two important events that had not yet transpired. The first event that Paul says must occur (before the Second Coming can occur) is the *apostasia* (the apostasy). The King James Version translation “a falling away” is not specific enough. The presence of the Greek definite article indicates that Paul had a particular apostasy in mind, namely the apostasy that he had spoken about when in Thessalonica (Cf. v.5).

The Proof Of The Apostasy

It is easy to see that the apostle Paul predicted apostasy. However, the time and nature of the apostasy is a matter of considerable debate. Some believe that the apostasy predicted by Paul is yet future—that it has not occurred even at this present time. For example, consider the claim of William K. Harrison as to the identity of the apostasy of Second Thessalonians 2:

An idea of what the apostasy means can be gained by considering the state of men immediately after the rapture. At that time there will not be a single human being left on the earth who is a real believer. Every one will be at enmity against God whether he is in what is left of the visible Christian organizations (Christendom) or is simply a pagan. That is, the apostasy will be total. Any earlier state of apostasy must be less than total and all of them differing from one another only in relative degree and type. Therefore we conclude that the only apostasy which can be designated by the definite article **the** is that total one which is the direct and immediate consequence of the rapture. It follows that the rapture must precede the apostasy as well as the great tribulation.¹

These words of Harrison demonstrate that beginning with an assumption, or series of assumptions, one can make a text teach virtually anything. It is not uncommon to read explanations of Second Thessalonians 2 which hinge entirely on a set of premises which are false from the start. If these interpreters are granted the right to affirm these unfounded premises as true, then it is easy for them to read into Second Thessalonians 2 whatever eschatological view they so desire.

Contrary to those who view the apostasy as yet future, others believe it has already transpired. In fact, some would argue that the apostasy foretold by Paul began to unfold in the first century. On the other hand, commentators like Ernest Best find it incredible that as early as Second Thessalonians Paul “was so pessimistic as to envisage an apostasy of Christians”.² However incredulous the idea might seem to commentators like Best, a number of Pauline passages do speak of first century Christians departing from the faith:

This charge I commit unto thee, son Timothy, according to the prophecies which went before on thee, that thou by them mightest war a good warfare; Holding faith, and a good conscience; **which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck:** Of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme (1 Tim 1:18-20).

But the younger widows refuse: for when they have begun to wax wanton against Christ, they will marry; Having damnation, because **they have cast off their first faith.** And withal they learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house; and not only idle, but tattlers also and busybodies, speaking things which they ought not.

I will therefore that the younger women marry, bear children, guide the house, give none occasion to the adversary to speak reproachfully. **For some are already turned aside after Satan** (1 Tim. 5:11-15).

This thou knowest, that all they which are in Asia be turned away from me; of whom are Phygellus and Hermogenes. But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness. And their word will eat as doth a canker: of whom is Hymenaeus and Philetus; Who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; **and overthrow the faith of some** (2 Tim. 1:15; 2:16-18).

In view of these passages, it is clear that it did not take long for the problem of apostasy to manifest itself in the early church. Although it is tragic to consider the apostasy of even one soul, it is clear that Paul's prediction of apostasy anticipated a more collective and widespread departure. The question remains: is there any proof of the Lord's church as a whole being affected by apostasy? The answer is, yes.

Judaism

A number of Bible students see Paul's prediction of apostasy as culminating in the establishment of the Roman Catholic Church. That an apostasy in the Lord's church precipitated the formation of the Roman Catholic Church, the papacy, and other assorted errors is too well documented to be successfully denied, as this chapter will later demonstrate.

However, even before the apostasy that led to the Roman Catholic Church, an apostasy of major proportions came to pass; namely, that of Jewish Christians departing from the Gospel of Christ to return to the practice of

Judaism. I have heard it said (and have said it myself) that the very first major departure (apostasy) that took place in the Lord's church came in the field of church organization. It would be more accurate to say that **one of** the very first major apostasies that beset the Lord's church came in the area of church government.

Technically, the first major apostasy that we read about in the Lord's church involved Jewish Christians migrating away from the Law of Christ and back to the Law of Moses. The very definition of "apostasy" points to a deliberate forsaking of a formerly professed position. Such a definition fittingly describes the Jews who, after embracing Christ, deliberately abandoned their allegiance to him to return to "another gospel" (Gal. 1:6-9). Some, attempting a synthesis of the Law of Christ with the Law of Moses, taught the brethren: "Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). Paul and Barnabas confronted these Judaizing teachers head-on. In fact, the books of Romans, Galatians and Hebrews all deal, to a large degree, with the problems and apostasy caused by the Judaizers.

Paul wrote Second Thessalonians in approximately 52 A.D. At that time the flower of this apostasy (the one caused by the Judaizers) had not yet reached full bloom, as it had by the time that Hebrews was written. The author of Hebrews warned the brethren to avoid departing from the living God, and admonished them to hold their confidence firm to the end (Hebrews 3:12-14). Further discussion of falling away is found throughout the epistle (Hebrews 6:4-6; 10:25-39; 12:25).

Gnosticism

The apostasy of the first century was not limited to those who forsook Christianity to go back to the Law of

Moses. The book of Colossians reveals that some of the members of the Lord's church were being duped by "philosophy and vain deceit," by a heresy that was "after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ" (Col. 2:8). Although there are many specifics we do not possess concerning the exact nature of the Colossian heresy, we do know that the doctrine was most dangerous because it detracted, in some fashion, from the adequacy, centrality, superiority, and supremacy of Christ.

Other aspects of the heresy being perpetrated upon the Colossians emerge as we continue to study the letter. The doctrine was, to some degree, patterned after Judaism with its emphasis upon circumcision, the observance of Jewish holy days, and restrictive ordinances regarding food and drink (Col. 2:16). However, the doctrine did not stop there. It went far beyond the components of the Judaism described in Acts 15 and the book of Galatians. Apparently, the heresy threatening the Colossians also exaggerated the power and place of angels, even to the point of encouraging the worship of angels (Col. 2:18). Moreover, the doctrine was heavily laden with the doctrines and commandments of men, which commandments required a "neglecting of the body" (Col. 2:23).

Hence, the doctrine was a combination of legalism (Col. 2:16-17), mysticism (2:18-19), and asceticism, i.e., the doctrine that the neglect of the flesh makes one more spiritual (2:20-23). G. G. Findlay may be exactly right when he suggests that in the remote country town of Colossae appeared the first symptoms of a heretical movement, so well known under its later name of Gnosticism. He argues, rather convincingly, that the Colossian heresy represents the earliest and crudest stage of the movement that culminated in the full-blown Gnosticism of the second century.

In fact, Gnosticism served as the catalyst for the development of several perverted ideas regarding the incarnation of Jesus Christ. After all, the Gnostic view was that if all matter is evil, then the body is truly evil, and thus God could have never come into a material body without contaminating Himself. Such a view led to one of the first doctrinal heresies about Christ to ever beset the church, that of Docetism.

As William Barclay explains: “The word ‘Docetism’ comes from the Greek verb which means ‘to seem,’ and literally means ‘seemism.’ It held that Jesus never had a real body, that he only appeared to have a body, that his body was nothing more than a kind of phantom apparition.”³ Apocryphal literature went so far as to affirm that Jesus left no footprints in the ground upon which He walked, and that when He was touched there was no body to feel.

Certain Gnostics believed in what might be called a “limited incarnation.” They believed that the “spiritual Christ” descended at some point into the man Jesus and left him before his crucifixion. After all, according to the Gnostic, there was no way that the true and real God could participate in the human pain and suffering of the cross.

Accordingly, Cerinthus affirmed that it was Simon of Cyrene who was crucified, while the actual Christ looked on the pathetic scene and laughed. The uninspired *Acts of John* depicts the real Christ engaged in conversation with John upon the Mount of Olives at the very same time that the man Jesus was being crucified upon Calvary. Thus, the Christ of Gnosticism is one who could never know any suffering.

The apostle John met the apostasy of Gnosticism head-on.

Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits
whether they are of God: because many false

prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world (1 John 4:2-3).

For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist (2 John 7).

Acknowledging that the Colossians had embraced the doctrine of Christ, Paul exhorted them to perpetuate their walk with Christ. He reminded them that they, having been rooted, were being built-up and continually established in the faith (2:7). How, then, could they leave the roots of their faith behind to embrace what amounted to an empty philosophy of man? Why should they turn away from Christ or add anything to His teaching when His nature and works are perfect?

Catholicism

A study of the New Testament church and its organization reveals that God intended for each church to be overseen by a plurality of elders (Acts 14:23) who met certain qualifications (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:5-9). These elders were also described as “overseers” or “bishops” (Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:1). They were also called “pastors” because it was their responsibility to feed the flock that was among them (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1-2). It is clear that elders possessed authority to rule over the local flock (Heb. 13:7, 17), but they were prohibited from abusing their position to the point of lording it over the flock (1 Pet. 5:3). Furthermore, the New Testament never depicts one elder as possessing

more authority than the other elder/elders with whom he served. Serving under the oversight of the elders were the deacons, evangelists, and other members of the congregation (Phil. 1:1).

In spite of the clear pattern for church organization outlined above, church history reveals that gradual changes in the form of church government paved the way to apostasy, and ultimately to the development of Roman Catholicism. In his classic work **The History of Reformatory Movements**, John F. Rowe remarks:

The enlargement of the jurisdiction of bishops, by extending it over dependent churches in the neighborhood of the towns and cities, and the multiplying of church officers, were innovations significant of coming evils. By degrees church officers, by assuming powers which did not belong to them, grew into a distinct order, and placed themselves above the "laity" as the appointed medium of conveying to them the grace of God. A church in the capital of a province, with its bishop, easily acquired a precedence over the other churches and bishops in the same district, and thus the metropolitan system grew up. A higher grade of eminence was accorded to the bishops and churches of the principal cities, such as Rome, Alexander [sic] and Ephesus; and thus we have the germs of a more extended hierarchical dominion.⁴

With these developments, certain elders began to call themselves "Bishops," attempting to exalt and distinguish themselves in rank and authority from the other elders with whom they served. The preeminence of men began replacing the preeminence of Christ (Col. 1:18; 3 John 9).

It wasn't long before primacy became the obsessive, all consuming quest of the metropolitan bishops. The chief

elders of the local congregations began to squabble amongst themselves as to who would be the Chief of the chiefs. The doctrine that Peter was the chief of all the apostles laid the foundation for the subsequent doctrine that Peter was, in fact, the universal bishop of the entire church. Hence, certain men began to proclaim themselves to be the Universal Bishop of all bishops, an office which eventually became known as the “papa,” i.e., “pope.” The argument of the Catholic Church notwithstanding, there is some debate about which bishop first wore the title of pope. However, the evidence seems to point to Leo I, who became bishop of Rome in 434 A.D. Robert H. Brumback writes the following concerning Leo I:

He is called the first pope by some historians. He issued notice to the priests that they could no longer marry. Following his ascension he assumed all authority over the churches of the West....Leo I asserted the claim that Peter was the chief of the apostles and the first bishop of Rome with such vigor that he is often called “the first pope.” He eventually secured from Valentinian an edict that required all churches of the West to submit all questions of dispute to him and the decision he made was to be final. About this same time the title of “papa” or “pope” began to be applied to the bishops and later it became the exclusive title of the Roman bishops.⁵

Often times at the behest of the pope, pretentious councils of men convened to discuss the policies of the church. The men who comprised these councils had the propensity to follow their own wills rather than the will of God. Therefore, it is not surprising that the decrees of these men precipitated even more departures from the

Word of God. In view of the fact that entire volumes have been written to chronicle the development of the apostasy, we have no illusion that we can adequately cover all of these departures in this one chapter. However, the following list provides more than ample proof of such apostasy:

◆ The introduction of “Holy Water” was introduced about 120 A. D. Alexander, a bishop of the church taught that water for baptism must first be blessed and consecrated for religious purposes.⁶

◆ The observance of Lent can be traced back to Telsephorus, a bishop at Rome, who, about 140 A. D. set aside 40 days as a period of fasting on the basis of an alleged apostolic tradition.⁷

◆ The origin of priestly robes was borrowed from Judaism and included in the Roman Church in 257 A. D. by Stephen, bishop of Rome.⁸

◆ Around 305 A. D. compulsory celibacy began to take root despite the clear Bible teaching of 2 Timothy 4:1-4; 1 Corinthians 9:5-6 and Matthew 8:14. The doctrine was enforced with more vigor beginning in 1074 A. D.⁹

◆ The first record of the practice of sprinkling came in 250 A.D. when Novation, who was sick, had water sprinkled upon him as a substitute for baptism. This “clinical baptism” did not come into general use until after the eight century when Pope Stephen III legalized it. Even then, it was not until the Council of Ravenna (1311) that sprinkling was declared to be as authoritative as immersion.¹⁰

◆ Origen is credited with advancing the doctrine of Purgatory as early as 220 A.D. The doctrine suggests that certain souls (who have not committed mortal sins) will be punished only temporarily in hell until the penalty for their sins has been satisfied.¹¹ The practice of praying for the dead came into practice about 380 A.D.¹² Praying to the dead began about a century later.

◆ The practice of private confession to a priest, also known as auricular confession, began in 390 A.D. However, it did not become a universal practice of the Catholic Church until 1215 when Pope Innocent III made it a fixed part of the doctrine of the church.¹³

◆ The worship and veneration of images began at the beginning of the 6th century.¹⁴

◆ In the year 666 A.D. Pope Vitalian approved the use of an organ in the worship of the Roman church. Despite his decision, it would be many years before the practice of instrumental music would be well received by the Catholic Church in general. Brumback observes:

There is just as much authority for the mass, the worship of images, for purgatory, and for the adoration of Mary as there is for instrumental music in church worship. Not until the apostasy developed and the papacy was formed did mechanical music find its way into the church worship. There is no mention of its use in the New Testament church nor any mention of it by the apostles. For hundreds of years after the death of the apostles there is no mention of its use. Ambrose, Chrysostom,[sic] Eusebius and Basil wrote much about the worship of the church but they do not make mention of mechanical aids to the worship....No one who is guided by the scriptures can be led to believe that instrumental music was connected with the worship of the early church.¹⁵

Rowe adds, "The general introduction of instrumental music can certainly not be assigned to a date earlier than the fifth or sixth centuries."¹⁶

◆ The Second Council of Nice (787 A.D.) upheld the idea that the literal body and blood of Jesus were present in the elements of the Lord's Supper.¹⁷

◆ Pope Pascal I promised that the torments of purgatory could be shortened by the payment of certain sums of money. The doctrine was expanded to teach that one could purchase indulgences, i.e., forgiveness for sins not yet committed. By the year 1190, this doctrine was a major part of the doctrine of the Catholic Church.¹⁸

◆ The Fourth Council of Constantinople (A.D. 869) passed a decree recognizing tradition as equal in authority to Holy Scripture.¹⁹

◆ In A.D. 1229 the Council of Toulouse wrote: “We forbid also the permitting of the laity to have the books of the Old and New Testament.” Later, Pope Gregory IX would argue that the “Holy Mother Church” alone had the right to interpret the Scriptures.²⁰

◆ In 1870 A.D. the Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church declared that the pope was infallible in matters of doctrine and morals.

On and on we could go listing the bizarre and unbiblical doctrines advanced by the Catholic Church. However, we have more than adequately accomplished our goal of providing proof of an apostasy from the pattern of New Testament Christianity.

The Protest Against The Apostasy

The time finally came when certain men began to protest against the doctrines and practices of the Catholic Church. Space limitations will only permit us to highlight the activity of three of these men.

John Wycliffe (ca. 1325-1384)

He is known as “The Morning Star Of The Reformation” largely because he was one of the first and most vigorous protestants against the Catholic Church. He believed strongly in the right of the people to hear and read the Bible for themselves. In 1379 he sent men out

into the countryside to preach and read the Scriptures to “the common man.” He began to make translations of the Bible so that the people could have a Bible, or at least portions of it, for their very own.

He contended that the decisions of the papacy and manmade councils should be weighed against the teaching of Holy Scripture. He concluded that Christ never ordained the office of the papacy; therefore, he regarded the popes as Antichrists. He rejected the errors of transubstantiation (the idea that the bread and fruit of the vine actually become the body and blood of the Lord) and purgatory.²¹ Despite the fact that Wycliffe’s preaching was very popular among the people, the Archbishop of London succeeded in prohibiting him from preaching. Undeterred from the mission of protesting the errors of Catholicism, Wycliffe devoted his time to writing tracts. Wycliffe died in 1384, but the Catholics hated him so much that in 1415 the Council of Constance ordered his books burned and his remains exhumed and burned. Thirteen years later this order was carried out.²²

Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Martin Luther was raised as a Catholic, educated as a Catholic, and eventually entered a monastery. However, the more he studied the Bible he became increasingly disenchanted with Roman Catholic doctrine. He was especially incensed when he saw the great poverty of the people, which had been caused by the sale of indulgences. This led him to write down his protest against the abuses of indulgences (and other Catholic doctrines) and on October 31, 1517, he nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the door of the church building at Wittenburg, Germany.

Word of his protest traveled swiftly, even reaching the papal court. The church tried to find some way to thwart his influence and halt his teaching. In 1518, Pope

Leo X summoned him to appear in Rome. In 1520, he burned the papal bull (a document sent directly from the pope) that demanded that he recant his position. Another bull was prepared in January of 1521 for the purpose of excommunicating Luther. When called upon to recant at the Diet of Worms, he firmly refused. He said:

Unless I shall be convinced by the testimonies of the Scriptures or by evident reason (for I believe neither Pope nor councils alone, since it is manifest they have often erred and contradicted themselves) I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted, and my conscience is held captive by the Word of God; and as it is neither safe nor right to act against conscience, I can not and will not retract anything.²³

We agree wholeheartedly with Rowe, who wrote of the above quote, “Memorable words, if only he had adhered to them.” Regrettably, for all of his spoken allegiance to the Word of God, Luther, like many others, was more interested in **reforming** the Catholic Church than he was in **restoring** New Testament Christianity. Listen again to Rowe:

During his conflicts with the powers of Rome, he exhorted his friends not to call themselves Lutherans, but Christians, and he also told them that he was not writing his tracts to bring them to him, but to bring them to the Bible....[T]he Lutheran Reformation accomplished great and lasting good; but religiously, as soon as the Augsburg Confession was made to occupy the place of the Bible, reformation ceased, and there has been but little progress in that direction since. Luther never attempted the complete restoration of Apostolic Christianity. He never comprehended

such a question, which is made more evident by the fact that the Augsburg Confession contains doctrines and dogmas which are purely of Papal origin, notably the dogma of transubstantiation, on account of which, as well as on account of other Romish dogmas, Zwingli and other reformers, in Switzerland, separated from him...²⁴

John Calvin (1509-1564)

John Calvin was born to Roman Catholic parents in Noyon, France on July 10, 1509. His father, a lawyer, was determined that John would become a Catholic priest. When John was fourteen years of age he began studies at the University of Paris. He attended the University of Orleans in 1528 to study law. While there, Calvin became captivated with classical literature. In fact, when his father died in 1531, John Calvin returned to Paris to study the literary classics.

In 1533, John Calvin experienced a sudden and emotional conversion that would change his entire course in life. It was during this year that Calvin abandoned the Roman Catholic religion and began promoting “reformation ideas” in opposition to the Catholic Church. After his “conversion” from Roman Catholicism, he spent three years in seclusion. During this time, he authored the “Institutes of Christian Religion,” and in 1536, (at age 26) he published his first edition.

As Calvin’s theology began to take on more shape, it eventually took on a name of its own: Calvinism. This is not to say that he referred to his doctrine as Calvinism. However, because he was the principal party responsible for articulating the doctrines of original sin, and the necessity of a miraculous and effectual working of the Spirit to overcome man’s depravity, these doctrines (and others implied by them) became known as Calvinism.

Calvinism contains five basic planks: (1) Men are totally depraved by virtue of inheriting such a sinful nature from their parents and ancestors. (2) God has chosen a definite number from all eternity to be recipients of eternal life, without faith or works or any other thing on the part of man as a condition. (3) Jesus died only for those whom God elected to be saved. His atonement was limited. The benefits of His death were not for all men. (4) Only those who were elected, and for whom Christ died, would receive the direct operation of the Holy Spirit. This miraculous power, exerted upon their hearts by the Holy Spirit, would be irresistible. (5) The elect saints will always persevere in their relationship with God. Such persons cannot fall away and be lost.

The five planks of Calvinism can be summarized and easily recalled by means of a well-known acrostic.

Total Hereditary Depravity
Unconditional Election
Limited Atonement
Irresistible Grace
Perseverance of the Saints

As you can see, combining the first letter of each of the five major premises of Calvinism gives us the word “TULIP.” Hence, one could say that the flower that changed the religious world is the “TULIP” of Calvinism.

The Proliferation Of Apostasy

Sadly, instead of really solving the problem of apostasy, the Protestant Reformation ultimately led to the proliferation of even more denominational bodies and sectarian groups. Luther overreacted to the Catholic emphasis upon human works and swung to the other end of the pendulum, teaching that salvation is by faith only.

Unable to refute the force of James 2:24, which clearly teaches that justification is **not** by faith only, Luther simply discounted the book of James, calling it a “right strawy epistle.”

Tragically, although Luther did good in seeking to turn men away from the errors of Catholicism, he did great and eternal damage in developing and promoting the false doctrine of salvation by faith only. How many multiplied thousands of people have died lost, erroneously thinking that they had been saved by faith only?

Regarding John Calvin, again, we fully appreciate every effort that he exerted to oppose the false doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church. Having said that, we must also point out that there is hardly a denomination on the face of the earth that has not been tainted by the false doctrine of Calvinism. Gospel preachers have spent as much time trying to undo the damning effects of Calvinism as John Calvin spent trying to undo the damnable effects of Catholicism. Both Catholicism and Calvinism fall short, far short of measuring up to the standard of Truth revealed in the New Testament.

The work of men like Luther and Calvin led people away from Catholicism right into the arms of Protestant denominationalism. As one group splintered off from another, new denominations were born. These denominational churches have continued to subdivide until the present moment and the ugly picture of a fragmented and sorely confused religious world is the consequence.

The Prescription To Cure Apostasy

We agree wholeheartedly with Rowe, who wrote:

We accept the good that preceding reformers have accomplished, and honor those who have

rescued the Bible from the grasp of a despotic hierarchy, but whatever they taught contrary to God's Word, we reject. What the early reformers left undone, we propose to complete; by which we mean an entire restoration of the ancient order of things, in faith and practice, in doctrine and discipline.²⁵

In the above quotation, we find the prescription that would cure the apostasy that exists in the religious world today. It is the same prescription given by Peter: "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God" (1 Pet. 4:11). What is involved in speaking as the oracles of God? In short, speaking where the Bible speaks involves two primary things: (1) speaking *only* that which is in accordance with the truth of the Bible (not adding to the Word of God), and (2) speaking *all* that the Bible says (not subtracting from the Word of God).

If all mankind would determine to go back to the Bible and the Bible alone for our rule of faith and practice, then the current apostasy going on, both in and out of the church, would come to a screeching halt. New Testament Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; rather, it has not been tried by the masses. The gospel is still the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16). Thus, all creeds, dogmas, disciplines, manuals, catechisms and policies of men are cast aside and replaced with the legislation from the sole Head and Chief Monarch of the church, Jesus Christ (Col. 1:18; 5:23). His legislation is found only within the sacred pages of Holy Writ. The faith has "once for all been delivered" (Jude 3) and Jesus will judge humanity based on the words that He has spoken (John 12:48; Heb. 1:1-2).

Our task is to motivate men to hearken unto Jesus and the apostles through whom He spoke (Matt. 17:5; Acts

3:22; John 16:12-15; 1 Cor. 2:9-16). If we could accomplish such a task, religious division (as it exists today) would vanish away and the restoration of primitive Christianity would be realized. This “primitive Christianity” of the church of the **past** is also relevant for the **present** day church, and will be forever essential to guiding the church of the **future!**

Endnotes

1 William K. Harrison, “The Time Of The Rapture As Indicated In Certain Scriptures.” **Bibliotheca Sacra**. Vol. 115 (1958): pp. 20-26.

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3 William Barclay, **The All-Sufficient Christ: Studies in Paul’s Letter To The Colossians** (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), p. 114.

4 John F. Rowe, **The History Of Reformatory Movements** (Cincinnati: John F. Rowe, Publisher, 1894), pp. 2-3

5 Robert H. Brumback, **History Of The Church Through The Ages** (St. Louis: Mission Messenger, 1957) p. 63.

6 Ibid, p. 19.

7 Rowe, p. 262.

8 Ibid, p. 265.

9 Ibid, p. 272.

10 Brumback, p. 34.

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12 Rowe, p. 278.

13 Brumback, p. 57.

14 Rowe, p. 299.

15 Brumback, pp. 75-76.

16 Rowe, p. 319.

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18 Brumback, p. 82.

19 Rowe, p. 338.

20 Ibid, p. 425.

21 Jerald C. Brauer, **Westminster Dictionary of Church History** (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971) p. 880.

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CHAPTER 3

What Does It Mean To Restore The Lord's Church?

Jim Laws

Introduction

THE *BIBLICAL PRINCIPLE OF* restoration is as old as the first sin. Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, and a restoration—that is, a return to God's way of doing things—became necessary. Restoration is, therefore, a return to the original. In the case of Adam and Eve that meant a return to the original relationship to God that was severed due to sin. Sometimes going backwards makes the best progress—to look back at the faith once for all delivered unto the saints (Jude 3).

This research studies the important matter of restoring the Lord's church. It answers the question posed for consideration, that being, what does it mean to restore the Lord's church?

It does this by examining, first of all, the principle of restoration itself and proves that the principle of restoration is a Biblical one.

Second, it then examines the restoration principle in light of the present discussion among churches of Christ regarding the nature of the church one reads about in the New Testament.

The Restoration Principle Is A Biblical Principle

The restoration principle is the Biblical view which teaches that man must return to the authority of the Bible, specifically the New Testament, as the source and basis of authority so as to be acceptable and pleasing in the sight of God. Plainly put, it says, “Let us do things as God has taught.” As simple as this may seem on the surface, there are a number of important presuppositions that lie behind such a view. It is important to understand them correctly.

First, such a view as going back and doing things God’s way, a restoration of New Testament Christianity, presupposes that God intended for the New Testament Scriptures to be the norm for all people for all time. Second, this restoration view would imply that departures have taken place from the Divine standard God has given and that a return to it—that is, the New Testament—is necessary. A third presupposition is not only that a return to the Divine standard is necessary but also that a return is possible. When these important matters are clearly distinguished and understood biblically, then one will see that such a view of restoring the Lord’s church is, indeed, God’s desire and, consequently, our obligation and privilege.

***God’s Intention Regarding
The New Testament Scriptures***

It has been said, and rightly so, that Christianity is the religion of Bible authority. This is crucial to a proper understanding of God’s view for our lives. In short, God’s view of both the Old and New Testaments, as it is revealed by the Scriptures themselves, is that they are verbally and plenary inspired of God the Holy Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16-17); as David said, “The Spirit of the LORD spake by me, and his word was in my tongue” (2 Sam. 23:2). God has

made clear that it is His Word that is the Truth and not the word of some other (John 17:17), that we can know the Truth of God, and that it is Truth and only the Truth that makes one free from the guilt of sin (8:32). We will be judged by this Truth one great day (12:48). God expects each one to obey the Truth. Peter states, "Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren" (1 Pet. 1:22). We are to have our loins girded with God's Truth (1:13). We, as Christians, are born by the Word of God, the Truth (Jas. 1:18); we worship God in truth (John 4:24); and we serve Him in truth (1 Sam. 12:24).

All authority, therefore, inherently resides with God (Rom. 8). The Father has given all authority to the Son (Matt. 28:18-20). Inspiration stresses that the Lord is the better revealer, better than the prophets, better than angels. Hebrews 1:1-2 states:

God who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds.

It is clear that we must listen to what He has said, that is, we must respect Bible authority (2:1-3). Peter makes the point very clearly that, if we are going to be pleasing in the sight of God, we must listen to what the Son of God has said (Acts 3:22-23). Hebrews 12:25 states:

See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven.

The Scriptures further teach that, if one is to be pleasing in the sight of God and enjoy the blessings that God has

in store for him, he must respond to God out of an obedient faith (Rom. 10:17; 2 Cor. 5:7). Therefore, one may properly conclude: (1) that God speaks to man today through His Son; (2) that the Son speaks to man through the Word; (3) that matters of faith—that is, that which pertains to life and godliness—are revealed by God through His Word; (4) and that all who please God will walk by faith and not by sight, that is, live their lives in faithful obedience to the faith that has been revealed, the Word of God. This naturally means that each is to act out of an obedient faith to be pleasing to God (Heb. 11:6). Colossians 3:17 states, “And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.”

It needs to be understood that God never considered His Word to be a temporary word to man but the final word to man. These were not temporary matters, but, rather, they were designed to carry mankind all the way through this life and into the next. There are many places where the Bible refers to its everlasting quality. First Peter 1:24-25 states, “The grass withereth, the flower thereof falleth away: but the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you” (cf. Isa. 40:8). The Bible, the Word of God, is the book of the ages: “For ever, O Lord, thy word is settled in heaven” (Psm. 119:89). Consequently, the Word of God gives knowledge of eternal life (1 John 5:13); it is the standard of faith and duty (Gal. 1:8; 1 Thess. 2:13); it is the sacred Word that is not to be altered (Deut. 4:2; Prov. 30:6; Rev. 22:19); and it is to be respected and kept through faithful obedience (Exod. 20:6; Deut. 4:40; Matt. 19:17; 1 John 5:3; Rev. 14:12).

***Departures Have Taken Place,
Making A Return Necessary***

Bible writers clearly foretold of departures that would come about from God's Divine way of doing things.

For instance, Acts 20:29 states, "For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock." Paul's warning to the elders at Ephesus had to do with false teachers who would come to lead many of the flock away to be destroyed. To warn them of this peril, he uses the vivid imagery of the people of God as being sheep and refers to them as a flock. Paul warns of a great falling away from the Truth that was to take place: "Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition" (2 Thess. 2:3). Timothy was warned of departures from the faith in the latter day: "Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils" (1 Tim. 4:1). There would come a time when men would not endure sound doctrine (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

Just as the Holy Spirit revealed, departures from the pattern revealed in the Scriptures did take place. A casual reading of church history from the second century onward reveals this fact rather plainly. The ancient heresy of Gnosticism may be traced to the second and third centuries; however, its seeds go back even further into ancient history. Many were led astray by this falsehood. Marcionism, which came from its leading advocate (Marcion, A.D. 85), asserted that the God of the Old Testament was not the same God of the New Testament. The God of the Old was a god of justice while the God of the New was one of love and mercy. The Marcionite church was thus formed and survived into the fifth century. Monetarism, which advocated the idea that Christ would come back and reign for a thousand years, began to grow. They went so far as to set a date for the return of Christ.

Further departures came about. One of the most notable would have to be the shift from having a plurality

of elders over the local congregation to that of one bishop and several elders by the last quarter of the second century. Ignatius speaks of “one bishop.”¹ Panegyric to Paulinus, bishop of Tyre, said:

Friends, and priests of God, and ye who are clad
in the sacred gown, adorned with the celestial
crown of glory, the inspired unction and the
sacerdotal garment of the Holy spirit (sic).²

A further development through time was the synod, which became a means of maintaining and promoting ecclesiastical unity and deciding questions of faith and discipline. Synods begin to arise by the middle of the second century (A.D. 50-170). At first they consisted of the bishops, presbyters, and deacons with the people assisting; then, by the council of Nicaea (325), bishops alone had the seat and voice. Synods began to claim the right of being the successors of the inspired apostles.³

By the middle of the second century, each congregation had its bishop, who was the official head of the congregation. Serving under him were the presbyters, or elders. By the middle of the third century, he was generally accepted as the ruler. By 325, Constantine held a synod of the empire; the Church had become his church. By 381, the church had bishops of Rome, and Rome, through time, held an unchallenged place in the west. In 381, the bishop was given a position after the pope, and in time, little by little, papal power overcame the church.⁴

The Roman church claimed human and Divine right for the papacy, trying to trace its institution directly back to Christ and Peter. However, biblically, Peter never made any such claim; in fact, one reads of Paul rebuking Peter over the matter of the Gospel and the Gentiles (Gal. 2:11). The first example of any sort regarding papal authority is

found toward the close of the first century in the letter of the Roman bishop Clement, an uninspired writer.

Issues such as the Ebionites, Judaizing Christians who denied the divinity of Jesus and the virgin birth, Novation of Rome who started the Donatists, as well as Millennialism, original sin, and infant baptism are by this time being taught. Departures regarding the worship of the church came about as well. Issues regarding baptism arose as infant baptism was introduced (100-140); the reading of the Scriptures now included the post-apostolic writings such as the Epistle of Clement of Rome, the Epistle of Barnabas, the Pastor of Hermas, and the Acts of Martyrs. The sermons of the church were changed from those who had the ability to speak to the assembly to later being confined to the clergy, and especially the bishop. Schools of theology arose, such as the Alexandrian School; the Antiochian School from which arose Nestorianism; and the African School, which was associated with Tertullian.

By the time Luther and the sixteenth century arrive, a crisis is seen in the Roman church. Generally speaking, historians will pinpoint the reformation movement in Europe as a process which began with the formal publication of the Ninety-five Theses by Martin Luther in 1517 and ended with the last session of the Council of Trent in 1563. It refers to the series of events in different parts of Europe which led to the fragmentation of the Roman church. The threat had been present for the past hundred years or so; however, it was Luther's searching and questioning of Catholic tradition, practice, and claims which made a permanent breach in the church. Luther declared, "To reform the church by the fathers is impossible; it can only be done by the word (sic) of God."⁵

Even though Luther recognized the authority of the Scriptures and saw in them to some degree the Biblical view of returning to God's way of doing things, still, he

failed to carry this Biblical principle out and, in reality, became a leading contributor to the religious division that we see on every hand today: Protestant denominationalism. Part of his failure is seen in his allowing that which is not distinctly forbidden by Scripture. In doing this he gives up on the Biblical position of espousing only that which is authorized by the Scriptures. Other important names come to consideration in Huldreich Zwingli and John Calvin. Protestantism spread through Europe and found its way into America.

It is not within the scope of this research, however, to present a complete and exhaustive approach to church history. It is important for the present consideration to understand that departures have taken place from the Divine standard, the New Testament. As has been stated before, church history bears this out. Serious departures over time have taken place, bringing about both apostasy and division. The end result of the reformation is seen today with Protestant denominationalism on every hand, with the various tenets of denominationalism being taught in various degrees.

A Return Is Possible

Church history proves that what the apostles said did come about. Departures resulted in apostasy and the development of the Roman church. Roman Catholicism is not interested in restoration. Its attitude toward the Scriptures is that they are not the final word or authority for our lives. With the fact of such departures from the Scriptures having been established, it is also important to understand that a return to the Divine standard is possible. Please notice a few illustrations of this principle of restoration in application.

Hezekiah came to the throne after the idolatrous reign of his father, Ahaz. However, Hezekiah broke down

the idols the people had been worshiping; he cleansed the temple and restored the services of Jehovah. The children of Israel kept the Passover, as it had not been kept since the day of Solomon (2 Kings 18:3-6). How was this possible? Hezekiah led the people to return to God's way of doing things. He brought about a restoration.

In the 7th century B.C., during the reign of Josiah, the principle of restoration is again at work in the lives of the people. In the 18th year of his reign, during the course of repairing the breaches of the house of the Lord, Hilkiah the priest found a copy of the Law. Shaphan the scribe then read the book to the young king, and, when Josiah heard it, he rent his clothes (2 Kings 22). Josiah took such action because he knew something of the wrath of God regarding the departures that had taken place in the worship and service of the children of Israel. He said:

Go ye, inquire of the Lord for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that is found: for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this book, to do according unto all that which is written concerning us (22:13).

By leaving the commands of the Word they had forsaken God (v. 17); however, this matter could and would be reversed by returning to what God had said, a restoration (ch. 23). A restoration, or return to God's way of doing things, is possible if one will choose to return to God by God's way.

The prophets teach this same plea. Jeremiah prophesied to Judah from Jerusalem over a period of forty years (sixty years after the death of Isaiah), which would be during the last period of Judah's apostasy. He was continually warning them of the fall and the destruction

of the city as well as the captivity of the nation. Jeremiah pleaded for a restoration:

Thus saith the Lord, stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk therein (Jer. 6:16).

Jeremiah was teaching that there is a good way, the choice of righteousness. There are ways that are false, and then there is the good way, which is the way of God. It is identifiable, it is possible to find it, and it is possible for the individual to accept it just as it is possible for one to refuse to walk in it. Ezekiel has reference to the restored temple and the worship of the Hebrew people, which would come about after the return of the exiles to the land (Ezek. 40-48).

From this one can see the significance of the restoration plea, the plea which states that man must return to the authority of the Bible, specifically the new Testament, as the source and basis of authority so as to be acceptable and pleasing in the sight of God. This is the case because God has given His Divine standard that is to be followed by all men everywhere, and through time serious departures have taken place. By this one sees that a return to that Divine standard is necessary and also that such a return is possible.

The Present Discussion Among Us

God's covenant has been made with a chosen people. Sometimes the relationship described by the Scriptures has reference to the church as "the people of God" or "the family of God." There are times when the church is referred to as having a special relationship to Christ as being the "body of Christ," or the vine and the branches, or the sheep

and their shepherd. There are times in the Scriptures where the church is referred to as the temple in which God dwells. All of these various ways in which the Bible describes the church has Christ as Lord over His church. Therefore, it is appropriate to say that the church of the New Testament is the church of God in Christ. When described as the body, Jesus is the head; when described as a family, Jesus is the elder brother; He is the Son, who is over God's household, the church. He is the husband as the church is described as the bride. He is the shepherd, and the church the sheep. He is the cornerstone of this new spiritual temple.

The word church brings with it the idea of an assembling body of people who come together to engage in acts of worship and praise to God. The word *ekklesia* is used in reference to an assembly. There are times when the word is used in reference to a local assembly. There are times when the word may be used in a universal sense to refer to all obedient believers (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 1:22; Col. 1:18). The assembly of God's people takes place in the name of Christ, that is, its very being is due to the redemptive work of God through Christ, and it recognizes the Divine authority of Christ for its existence. It functions according to that Divine authority. Those who freely choose to accept the Gospel of Christ through an obedient faith are added to the church and are members of it (Acts 2:47).

It is important to clearly understand what is meant by "the church" when discussing this matter of restoration. Just what is it that we are being called upon to restore? It is the restoration of New Testament Christianity; it is a return to the Bible; it is a call for an abandonment of denominational names and creeds (departures from the Divine standard) and a return to the authority of Christ. When men and women heard the Gospel (Acts 2), they obeyed it with all of their heart and were added to the

church by means of their repentance and baptism into Christ (2:38). They were added to the church but not to a denomination. They did not affiliate themselves with any organization of human origin; in fact, such did not exist at the time. The restoration plea simply calls for men and women to return to God's original plan found for us in the New Testament.

As one reads the literature that is being published today, he will find that this simple plea (that has come to be called the Restoration Plea) has its critics.⁶ For instance, one critical view holds that the restoration of New Testament Christianity is simply impossible—that the best one can do is work toward it. This view, of course, says that the work of restoration is an ongoing process; one never really finishes the work of restoring. According to this view, one can never come to say, "We have restored the New Testament church in our day."

However, it is false to hold to such a view. It was clear that a restoration took place in the days of Josiah, Ezra, and Nehemiah, as well as Hezekiah. These Old Testament men realized that the old Mosaic system with its laws and commandments could be restored, even though this old Law was hundreds of years removed from their own time. True, restoration is an ongoing process in the sense that it will always be needed so long as there are those who continue to add to or take away from God's Word. We must measure ourselves by God's Word, the perfect standard, observing the composite picture of the church, which includes the good that God approved and the bad that God commanded them to change. It is in this sense that restoration is ongoing.

Closely related to this is the objection that a restoration is not complete, nor can it be, because we have not grown in our love for the Lord or for each other as we should. We have not restored those attitudes that we

should have. However, one should keep in mind that the restoration plea does not include personal Christian growth and maturity, as that is the task of every child of God individually.

Did the restoration of Josiah's day in ancient Israel include the personal growth of every one of the Old Testament Israelites? Hardly so. If such were the case, Israel would never have been restored to faithfulness to God. The fact is, however, that Israel was restored, as the Bible describes the results of Josiah's restoration by saying that there had not been such a Passover unto the Lord from the days of the judges, nor in all the days of the kings of Israel and Judah (2 Kings 23:21-23). He did so that he might "perform" the words of the Law (v. 24), and there was no king like him, either before or after, who turned to the Lord by following the Law of Moses (v. 25). Restoration includes structural, organizational, and doctrinal details. The matter of personal Christian growth upon the part of each member is another matter.

A further misconception during our day is the idea that the restoration movement, as such, was responsible for the church. We are what we are as a people, they say, because of the writing which came out of the restoration movement or the emphasis that was being made at the time. The end result of this line of reasoning is to make the church that has been patterned after the church of the New Testament into a denomination itself. The emphasis is, "We ought to go ahead and admit it." They say, "We are a religious denomination like everyone else."

However, one can easily see the difference between what the Bible teaches and what religious denominations are doing. It has already been shown that the Lord does not want His disciples divided into denominations, sects, and parties (John 17:20-22; Eph. 2:11-18; 4:4; 1 Cor. 12:20; John 10:16). Paul denied that the church of the Lord was

a “sect” (Acts 24:5,14). Congregations in New Testament times were simply “churches of Christ” and were not a part of a denomination, as denominationalism is completely unknown in New Testament Scriptures. Therefore, the church which is pleasing to the Lord is the one which wears the Lord’s name; honors the Lord’s will; believes His Word, the Bible; worships Him in spirit and according to truth; and is identical to the pattern found for churches in the New Testament in organization, worship, and evangelism. A restoration is not the beginning of some new religious body but rather the restoring of an old one, in this case one as old as the New Testament itself. When a group of people faithfully follow the pattern set out for them in the New Testament, how could they be anything else but New Testament Christians?

Perhaps a specific case in point will help clarify what is being said critically of the restoration plea. In an effort to recognize the church as a denomination, attempts have been made to redefine the terms that have been used regarding this entire discussion. For instance, Hughes, in his book **Reviving The Ancient Faith**, wants to redefine the terms “sect,” “church,” and “denomination” from a theological to a sociological perspective. He states:

To unravel this knotty situation, we need to explore these terms from a sociological perspective. When used in their classic, sociological sense, the terms church, denomination, and sect signify social realities, not theological ideals. Sociologically speaking, the term church refers to a legally established, ecclesiastical institution. In that sense, there is no ‘church’ in the United States at all: the First Amendment to the Constitution places all religious communities on an equal footing before the law and leaves them with only two options— to exist either as sect or as denomination.⁷

The point, again, is that in sociological terms every Christian tradition in America must exist as either sect or denomination. That is social reality, and Churches of Christ were—and are—no exception.⁸

Notice the attempt to shift the discussion away from what the Bible says, as well as the attempt to redefine such terms as “church,” “sect,” and “denomination” to fit a sociological perspective. To do this one may, he thinks, consistently refer to the church today, which is patterned after the New Testament, as a religious denomination.

An interesting consideration here is that, though the author tries to redefine the terms sociologically, still, he continues to use them in the discussion theologically, committing the fallacy of ambiguity. When one assigns his own definition to terms, he soon gets into trouble. Take note of his discussion when he says that throughout history there have been some who, though few in number, have understood this fact, and they viewed the notion of nondenominational Christianity

not as something Churches of Christ could actually achieve but rather as a biblical (sic) ideal to which they might aspire. These people argued that the New Testament knows one church only, which implies that the denominational arrangement is wrong, but they refused to argue that they themselves did not partake of this sin. Among these people one finds the highest and noblest conception of the ‘nondenominational’ ideal as it was understood by Churches (sic) of Christ.⁹

Please take note of the fact that (1) the writer refers to some who saw the denominational arrangement as being sinful, that is, without Biblical support, (2) though sinful,

they themselves were involved in that sinful arrangement, and (3) though they might aspire to do otherwise, it is implied that they cannot. Thus, Hughes labels both the Campbell and Stone Movements, along with the product of their merging together, as sectarian. The very concept of nondenominational Christianity is a “myth,” he says.¹⁰

Consequently, the basic thrust of the position is that, since Campbell developed the restoration plea out of the culture in which he lived, the church must develop a new reference point in the culture in which it now exists. Therefore, the restoration plea of the nineteenth century, which was a plea to return to first century Christianity, is now out-of-date and unworkable as the church moves into the twenty-first century.

This research has already dealt with the truth that God’s Word is the standard and that it was meant to be viewed as God’s standard for doing things His way for all men everywhere. It is described as the living Word of God because of its power to transform lives and save them by the grace of God, regardless of the culture in which one finds himself.

As has been proven in this research, the restoration plea is a return to God’s way of doing things. It is not a culturally inspired methodology but rather a Divine principle to be followed. The research has established the fact that departures have taken place and that a return to that Divine standard is necessary and possible.

The plea of the restorers, as well as that of faithful churches of Christ today, is the same. If one will return to the authority of the New Testament pattern in teaching and practice, then the New Testament church will emerge. Ancient Israel was deeply involved in the evil influence of Baalism, yet God’s prophet called for a return to the worship of Jehovah God (1 Kings 18).

Summation

Congregations in New Testament times were simply “churches of Christ” and were not a part of a denomination, as denominationalism is completely unknown in New Testament Scriptures. Therefore, the church which is pleasing to the Lord is the one which wears the Lord’s name; honors the Lord’s will; believes His Word, the Bible; worships Him in spirit and according to truth; and is identical to the pattern found for churches in the New Testament in organization, worship, and evangelism. Such a church is not a denomination; it is a church which belongs to Christ. It is Christ’s church—nothing more and nothing less.

Endnotes

1 J. B. Lightfoot, **The Apostolic Fathers** (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), p. 80.

2 Christian Frederick Cruse, trans., **Eusebius’ Ecclesiastical History** (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), p. 406.

3 Philip Schaff, **History of the Christian Church**, Volume 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1950), pp. 176-178.

4 Charles M. Jacobs, **The Story of the Church** (Philadelphia: The Muhlenberg Press, 1947), pp. 32-41.

5 Philip Schaff, Volume 4, p. 36.

6 Notice recent discussions in Rubel Shelly, “A Passion for Nonsectarian Faith,” **Wineskins**, p. 4; also Russ Dudrey, “Restoration Hermeneutics Among Churches of Christ: Why Are We At An Impasse?,” **Restoration Quarterly**, Volume 30, Number 1 (1988), pp. 17-42; C. Leonard Allen, Richard T. Hughes, and Michael R. Weed, **The Worldly Church** (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1988); Richard T. Hughes, **Reviving The Ancient Faith** (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996). As a response to the criticism the restoration plea has been receiving of late, the reader should carefully consider the matter of

undenominational Christianity in Jim Laws, "The Meaning of Udenominational Christianity," **The Church: The Sect Everywhere Spoken Against**, ed. Jim Laws (Memphis: Getwell church of Christ, 1997), and Flavil Nichols, "The Jerusalem Church: A Model For All Ages," **The Church: The Sect Everywhere Spoken Against**, ed. Jim Laws (Memphis, TN: Getwell church of Christ, 1997). See also Alan Highers, "The Church at the Crossroads," **The Spiritual Sword** (October 1996), pp. 1-5.

7 Hughes, pp. 4-5.

8 Ibid, p. 5.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid, p. 9.

CHAPTER 4

Lessons From The Church at Jerusalem

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Introduction

ON THE *PENTECOST* FOLLOWING our Lord's resurrection and ascension, "there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, from every nation under heaven," plus numerous proselytes (Acts 2:5,10).¹ One historian estimates that the residents of the city normally numbered approximately 100,000 at the time of the events described in Acts 2.² Of course, the pilgrims at the great feasts swelled its population to perhaps many times more than this number. The faithful from all parts of the world converged on the city for the Passover, and, due to the vast distances from which many of them came (and the travel time required to cover them), they would doubtlessly stay the fifty days until the Pentecost before beginning their homeward trek.

A festive, almost carnival, atmosphere must have prevailed in and around Jerusalem during the time involving the two great Mosaic feasts. With but little imagination, one can almost see and hear the vendors and merchants whose innumerable shops lined the streets, offering their freshly-caught fish, recently-slaughtered meats, produce, bread, and spices, the mingled smells of which produced an almost overwhelming savor. Because the homes and hostelry in and around Jerusalem were

woefully inadequate to cope with such an influx of humanity, it is likely that, in the evenings, one would be able to see thousands of families' campfires in every available space up and down the hills and valleys surrounding the city. The sound of children running through the camps and playing their games with their recently-met playmates must have filled the air. Such is the physical setting this writer pictures in his mind as he reads and meditates on the material in Acts 2, the record of which chronicles the establishment of the church of Christ.

The spiritual setting of the establishment of the church in Jerusalem is even more interesting and dramatic to the spiritually minded soul. It was no mere happenstance that, in this storied citadel, the first Gospel sermon was preached in its fullness, resulting in the beginning of Christ's indestructible kingdom. Seven centuries earlier, Isaiah had identified Jerusalem/Zion as the place from which, in the "latter days" ("last days," KJV), the law—the Word of the Lord—would be proclaimed, resulting in the establishment of a kingdom that would attract all nations (Isa. 2:2–4). In some of the very last words the Lord spoke to the apostles, He told them that "repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name unto all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47). They were told to wait in the city till they were clothed with power from Heaven—baptized in the Holy Spirit, according to the Father's promise (v. 49; Acts 1:4–5). They were then to begin bearing witness to their Master, first in Jerusalem, then Judea and Samaria, and, finally, to all the earth (Acts 1:8). It should be evident even to the most casual observer that God had planned for centuries that Jerusalem would be the birthplace of His church.

The establishment of the church in Jerusalem was the culminative step in God's plan for the redemption of mankind. For this reason Acts 2, because of the events it records, stands out as a pivotal, if not **the** pivotal, chapter of the Bible. It is interesting to note that, in a certain sense, two churches were established on Pentecost in Jerusalem. The **universal** church began, which would embrace all of those who on that day obeyed the Gospel, but which would also embrace all in every succeeding generation and in every location who would obey the Gospel. The **local** church in Jerusalem also began on Pentecost. At first, it was the universal church in its entirety, but within a few years it was only one of many that sprouted from the seed of the kingdom which was being sown in ever-widening circles. It is this local congregation in Jerusalem—the very first church of Christ—to which we now turn our attention. For the first few years of its existence it was an exemplary body of people, from which we may learn much. Later, elements within the church rose to the surface to spoil its pure reputation. But, even from these latter events, there are lessons we can learn.

Exemplary Characteristics In The Early Years In Jerusalem

What can we observe in the early years of the church in Jerusalem that is worthy of our emulation?

It Was A Church That Was Doctrinally Sound

The first description we read of the three thousand who obeyed the Gospel is that “they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42). The “teaching” referred to here was not the private opinions or philosophies of the twelve. They had received the Holy Spirit which Christ had promised to send upon them when He ascended to the Father (John 14:26; 15:26-27; 16:13;

Acts 1:4-5,8; 2:1-4,16-21). With His coming, He had given these men the fullness of the Truth, and it was this inspired body of doctrine that constituted the “apostles’ teaching.” The emphasis on both teaching and obeying only the inspired Word is overwhelming in the Bible as a whole, but especially in the New Testament. The Lord sternly warned His followers about false prophets (Matt. 7:15-16; 24:11) and urged upon us uncompromising obedience of the Truth (Matt. 7:21-27; John 8:32; 14:15,23-24). The New Testament epistles are filled with statements which exalt the doctrine of Christ and strict adherence to it (Rom. 16:17-18; 1 Cor. 4:17; 14:37; 16:13; Gal. 1:6-9; Eph. 4:14-15; Phil. 2:12; Col. 2:8; 1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Thess. 2:11-12; 1 Tim. 1:3,19-20; 4:1-3,6; 6:3-5; 2 Tim. 2:14-18; 3:13-17; 4:1-4; Tit. 1:9-14; 2:1,15; 3:8-9; Heb. 13:9; Jas. 1:21-25; 2 Pet. 2:1-3; 1 John 2:3-6; 2 John 9-11; Jude 3; Rev. 22:7,18-19).

The Jerusalem church was numerically strong from the first. However, its strength did not lie in its size but in its fidelity to the will of God. A congregation of fifty members who love the Truth is far stronger (by the Lord’s standard) than one of five hundred folk who care more about pleasing men than God. It matters not how sincere people may be or how many “good works” they may do—if they do not abide in the doctrine of Christ, they have not God and strive in vain (Matt. 7:21-23; 15:9; 2 John 9).

Our day is cursed with hundreds of congregations that have sold their souls for public approval, denominational fellowship, numbers, and dollars—at the expense of true doctrine and practice. Many of these have already become denominational in concept and practice and are simply not honest enough to remove “church of Christ” from their signs, and many others are inexorably moving in that direction. The cause of their behavior and change of direction are easily discovered—they ceased to love the Truth and seek its authority for their practice.

Denominationalism is the certain and only destiny of any religious body that so behaves, regardless of how large the letters are that spell out “church of Christ” on their building or signpost! The congregation in Jerusalem remained strong only as long as it continued in the apostles’ teaching, and not one minute more. The same is true concerning any congregation of God’s people in this modern age.

It is noteworthy that Jerusalem’s fidelity was not merely to Peter’s teaching, but to that of all of the apostles (i.e., “apostles” is a plural possessive referring to the teaching of all of the apostles—Acts 2:42). Roman Catholic dogma elevates Peter to primacy over the other apostles and crowns him as their first pope. Were this true, Luke made a grave error in his account of the church’s behavior and showed disrespect for Peter in the process. He should have written that “they continued stedfastly in **Peter’s** teaching.” Anyone who knows anything about the appointment, commission, inspiration, and work of the apostles, to say nothing of the pattern for the church, knows that the whole papal system is a human myth that power-mad apostate clerics “made up as they went along.” Peter had no more inspiration, authority, or spirituality than any other apostle. **All** of the apostles were filled with the Spirit and spoke in other tongues on Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4). It was “**Peter and the eleven**” who declared the Gospel on Pentecost (although we only have the digest of Peter’s sermon) (vv. 14,37). Signs and wonders were done, not only by Peter, but by **all of the apostles** (v. 43). We should not be surprised that the teaching in which the church continued is likewise ascribed to **all of the apostles**. Were there no other lines of argumentation to expose the papal claims relating to Peter, Luke’s record in Acts 2 alone is sufficient to render a death blow to the Catholic heresy.

We further notice that the church continued in the “apostles’ teaching” (“doctrine,” KJV). “Teaching” (“doctrine”) is singular in this passage, as it is in every other usage in the New Testament when it refers to revealed, inspired Truth. Never do we read of the “doctrines of Christ,” “sound doctrines,” “doctrines of God,” or “good doctrines” in reference to the Gospel message. While all of these phrases appear in the New Testament, **they always appear with the singular form, “doctrine.”** However, the plural form, “doctrines,” is used in reference to heretical and false teachings, whether of men or demons (Matt. 15:9; Col. 2:22; 1 Tim. 4:1). While the Bible does not tell us why this distinction is made, we do not believe it artificial or accidental. Even though the New Testament is a collection of twenty-seven documents, it is cohesive in its theme and harmonious in its message, thus forming a whole—**it is one body of doctrine** (1 Cor. 4:17; Jude 3). Contrariwise, the precepts and teachings of men are as varied as their human authors and their opinions, rightly referred to as “doctrines” and “teachings.”

It Was A Church Without Distinctions

The Jerusalem church was composed of all classes of people. There were the apostles, who were spiritual giants compared to others. But there were also those who had murdered Christ, who must be classed as spiritual pygmies. There were local Palestinian Jews, but also Hellenistic Jews and even some proselytized Gentiles from various areas, languages, and cultures of the world (Acts 2:5,10; 6:1). There were wealthy landowners (4:34), such as Barnabas (vv. 36-37), Ananias and Sapphira (5:1-3), and Mary (12:12-13). But there were numerous members, especially widows, who were in the depths of poverty and dire need (2:44-45; 4:35; 6:1).

Any random group of three thousand, which was the size of this congregation when it began, will generally run the gamut of all classes of people, as did this one. Yet there seemed to be no consciousness in these early days of class, caste, economic level, or even race in these early days. Unfortunately, an element eventually arose within the Jerusalem church that separated brethren based to some degree on race, but it was roundly and soundly rebuked by the apostles (Acts 15:1-5; Gal. 2:11-13). James, the Lord's half-brother (and apparently an elder in the Jerusalem congregation—Acts 15:4,6,13; 21:18), at one point used his influence to disenfranchise uncircumcised Gentile saints, not only in Jerusalem, but elsewhere (Gal. 2:12). However, he took the stand for Truth on this issue in the Jerusalem discussion (Acts 15:13-21). Later, when he wrote his epistle, he strictly proscribed drawing any lines of discrimination, much less withholding fellowship, based on mere personal scruples or prejudices:

My brethren, hold not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons. For if there come into your synagogue a man with a gold ring, in fine clothing, and there come in also a poor man in vile clothing; and ye have regard to him that weareth the fine clothing, and say, Sit thou here in a good place; and ye say to the poor man, Stand thou there, or sit under my footstool; Do ye not make distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Hearken, my beloved brethren; did not God choose them that are poor as to the world to be rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he promised to them that love him? But ye have dishonored the poor man. Do not the rich oppress you, and themselves drag you before the judgment-seats? Do not they blaspheme the

honorable name by which ye are called? Howbeit if ye fulfil the royal law, according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself, ye do well: but if ye have respect of persons, ye commit sin, being convicted by the law as transgressors (Jas 2:1-9).

Any congregation is wrong if it practices respect of persons. Paul reminds us that we are all on the same level as sinners redeemed by the blood of Christ: “There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither bond nor free, there can be no male and female; for ye are all one man in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). Peter enunciated a lesson which was hard even for this apostle to learn: “Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34-35). Since God does not recognize social, economic, sex, or racial distinctions when it pertains to redemption from sin and fellowship with Him, we dare not. There should never be a preference shown for any fellow Christian based on the color of skin, economic status, social standing, or sex in any congregation of the Lord’s people. Apparently, the Jerusalem church was a model of this righteous policy in its early years. May we all search our hearts and seek to rid them of any such shallow distinctions we may hold.

It Was A United Church

In its early days, the Jerusalem church was bound together in a unity of **purpose** that must have been a source of great joy to all of the brethren. Luke wrote of them: “And all that believed were together, and had all things common...And day by day, continuing stedfastly with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread at home, they took their food with gladness and singleness of heart”

(Acts 2:44,46). He later added: “And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and soul: and not one of them said that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common” (4:32).

The unity thus described in both of the preceding passages is connected with the fact that they “had all things common.” That there was no respect of persons or discrimination (especially in regard to economic status and provision of the necessities of life) directly promoted their unity. The first occasion of schism among the brethren occurred when this principle began to be neglected in the case involving the Grecian widows (Acts 6:1). It is instructive to observe the way the apostles dealt with the complaint that was brought to them. It was neither denied nor dismissed as unworthy of consideration. It is apparent that the apostles investigated the complaint sufficiently to determine that it was deserving of their action. They assembled the church and instructed the brethren to appoint seven good men who could correct the problem, and peace was thus restored (vv. 2–6). What was potentially an explosive situation was avoided by the prompt attention and action of the apostles.

Elders can learn much from the response of the apostles in this case. We have seen elders deny the existence of problems and neglect or refuse to deal with complaints in their initial stages until the problems reached massive, destructive proportions in the local church. Not every complaint a brother or sister may bring will be worthy of action, but, if elders do not have the facts at hand to know a complaint is unworthy, they would do well to investigate sufficiently to find out whether it is. Far too often, the attitude toward a potential problem is, “If we ignore it, it will go away.” Problems are not solved by ignoring them. When matters that need attention continue to be “swept under the rug,” the pile just gets

higher and more troublesome to remove. Many congregational problems that eventually erupt in strife and division could have been avoided altogether if they had been promptly addressed at their first sign.

The Jerusalem church was also characterized by a unity of **place**. Their meeting place was “in the temple.”³ This they did “day by day, continuing stedfastly,” at least in the early existence of the church there (Acts 2:46). They had a meeting place, and they must have known when they were to meet. We can hardly imagine any of them discussing how few of these assemblies they could get by with missing or asking, “Do I have to go every time?”

We see in the Jerusalem church a unity of **prayer**. The very first description of their activities declares that they “continued stedfastly in the prayers” (Acts 2:42). When Peter and John were released after their first arrest, they “came to their own” and “lifted up their voice to God with one accord” (4:23-24). When the seven men were chosen by the church to take care of the “daily ministration,” the apostles prayed in connection with their appointment (6:6). When James had been martyred and Peter imprisoned (awaiting the same fate), many brethren came together at the house of Mary “and were praying” when Peter knocked at the door of her gate (12:1-12). Those ancient brethren had an unflinching faith in God that He would, as promised, hear their prayers. We should individually continue in prayer as we live from day to day, but there is no substitute for congregational prayer. The Jerusalem church is our model in this regard.

In the Jerusalem church we see a unity of **practice**. Those original three thousand had all heard and believed the same Gospel sermon on Pentecost (Acts 2:37). They had all (“every one”) been commanded to repent and be baptized unto remission of their sins, which they had done (vv. 38,41). They were all thereupon added to the church

by the Lord (v. 47). God has never given any other directions to men who want to be saved and become part of His church; thus, all of those others who swelled the ranks of the Jerusalem church in its earliest years obeyed the same Gospel commands.

They not only did the same things in order to be saved and added to the church, but there was unity of practice in their worship activities. We have already emphasized the respect of the Jerusalem saints for apostolic teaching (2:42). We now emphasize the way in which this respect for the Truth affected their worship: “And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers” (v. 42). What was true of all of the saints in Jerusalem concerning their practice was likewise true of all of the other congregations all over the world because the same Gospel was preached everywhere by all of the inspired men. Paul remarked to the Corinthians that he was sending Timothy to them, “who shall put you in remembrance of my ways which are in Christ, **even as I teach everywhere in every church**” (1 Cor. 4:17, emp. mine, DM). So today, true churches of Christ are one in their worship practices because they have all been taught and all follow the doctrine of Christ, regardless of the nation in which they exist.

It Was A Compassionate Church

Luke repeatedly describes the compassion of the Jerusalem church in its early days:

And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and they sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all, according as any man had need (Acts 2:44-45).

And not one of them said that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had

all things common...For neither was there among them any that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto each, according as any one had need (4:32,34-35).

There was a "daily ministration" of food being made to widows (6:1-2).⁴ Apparently, the apostles personally distributed the various items to those in need for some time. However, there came to be so many in need that some, especially among the widows, were being neglected. The needs had outstripped the ability of the apostles to do this work and to continue their work of preaching. Thus, to ensure an equitable compassion, by which the needs of none were neglected, and to allow the apostles to "continue steadfastly in prayer, and in the ministry of the word," they had the church appoint a committee of seven men to oversee the distribution. Although the work with which these men were charged is a work that could well have been (and could presently be) done by deacons, we deny that these were deacons in the sense of later references to them (1 Tim. 3:8-13; Phil. 1:1).⁵

Of all people, the Lord's faithful church, not only as individuals, but also as congregations, should be compassionate and generous in responding to the needs of those who are helpless. Those first members of the church were Jews who had been taught in their Law to care for the poor, the widow, and the orphan (Exod. 22:22; 23:11; Lev. 19:10; Deut. 14:29; 15:7-9; Psm. 41:1), and perhaps their compassion resulted from that teaching. They did not have to be instructed by the apostles in the virtue of benevolence. Also, many of them had heard the Lord, as He taught those who would follow Him, to be mindful of and generous toward the needs of others (Matt.

5:7; 7:12; 23:23; Mark 14:7; Luke 14:13; 18:22). Doubtlessly, many of them had witnessed one or more occasions on which He demonstrated the traits of compassion and mercy toward the helpless (Acts 2:22). However, as the Gospel spread to the Gentiles, and epistles were written to the congregations that sprang up among them, the inspired men repeatedly taught the nobility and necessity of compassion and care (Rom. 12:13; 1 Cor. 16:1-2; 2 Cor. 8:1-4; Gal. 6:10; Eph. 4:28; Phil. 2:1-4).

Having established the duty of helping the helpless, we would do well to heed some cautions concerning its practice:

1. *Congregations should not mimic the “Salvation Army,” seeking to become primarily a “benevolent” institution.* The principal work of the church is preaching the Gospel, “holding forth the word of life,” evangelism (Matt. 28:19-20; Mark 16:15-16; Phil. 2:15-16). Jesus was full of compassion for the helpless, and most of His signs and wonders were performed as expressions of the same. However, His compassionate acts went far beyond the momentary relief of physical suffering. His deeper and principal purpose in doing them was to prove that He was Who He said He was and that He could do what He claimed—bring them relief from the awful, eternally destructive malady of sin:

Many other signs therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name (John 20:30-31).

Our Lord did not come to our planet merely to heal broken and diseased bodies. He could have stayed in heaven and done that through His human servants.

Rather, He came to do what neither man nor angel could do—redeem mankind from sin. Time after time He announced this singular aim: “For the Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10; cf. Matt. 20:28; John 10:10; 12:47; 1 Tim. 1:15). The genuineness of His compassion toward the helpless is not lessened by the fact that His intent was to heal their souls more than their bodies. While congregations ought to be sensitive to the physical needs of others, they ought to ever keep in sight the greater blessing of bringing aliens to a saving knowledge of the Truth and saints to a higher level of devotion to the Lord.

2. Not everyone who seeks help is worthy of it.

Paul’s inspired rule, “If any will not work, neither let him eat” (2 Thess. 3:10b), has neither been rescinded nor amended. While there are many who are in dire need due to no fault of their own, there are also many who are without the necessities of life because they have squandered their livelihood through such things as undisciplined spending and gambling. Many of these same ones, plus others, have brought financial and/or physical ruin upon themselves through consumption of alcohol, illegal drugs, and tobacco. Until such repent, we actually help perpetuate their sins and their lives as bums when we merely dole out resources to them without attempting to interest them in the Gospel.

It has always seemed outrageous to this writer that people will come to a church office seeking money for food (or even food itself) and/or lodging, reeking with the odor of liquor and/or tobacco. If they have enough money for their sinful habits they should have enough for food. If they have wasted their resources on sinful habits they do not deserve to eat—no one forced them to so behave. It is even more outrageous to dole out help indiscriminately to such folk.⁶ The Lord’s church has far more important works

to do and upon which to spend its money than propping up such folk (many of whom are professional deceivers) in their evil habits for one more day.

It Was An Evangelistic Church

The church in Jerusalem could not have begun without the evangelistic effort of the apostles on Pentecost. In fact, no church can begin without evangelism. The apostles continued to preach the Truth (Acts 3:11-4:2; 4:31,33; 5:19-21,25,28-29,42). However, we soon see others taking a leading evangelistic role, including Stephen, who paid for his efforts with his life (6:8-7:60).

Initially, their efforts were all in Jerusalem. Their simple procedure involved both public and private proclamation: “And every day, in the temple and at home, they ceased not to teach and to preach Jesus as the Christ” (5:42). The enraged Jewish council accused them, correctly no doubt, of filling Jerusalem with the Gospel (5:28). Although the apostles and those early disciples apparently did not at first perceive the “all nations” part of the great commission, they admirably executed the “Go make disciples” part of it from the start (Matt. 28:19).

When the church was scattered by the persecution led by Saul, the brethren “went about preaching the word” in numerous places (Acts 8:4). Specifically, Philip went to Samaria, where he established the church (vv. 5-13). Jerusalem then sent Peter and John to help with this new work (vv. 14-24). On the way back to Jerusalem, they preached in numerous Samaritan villages along the way (v. 25). Through the agency of an angel and the Holy Spirit, Philip was then sent to teach the Ethiopian, whom he baptized (vv. 26-39). Afterward, he preached all along the way to Caesarea (v. 40). Behind Luke’s reference to “the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria” (9:31) is the fact that all of these churches almost certainly owed their existence to evangelistic efforts of Jerusalem Christians.

Peter made an extensive evangelistic tour involving the cities of Lydda, Joppa, and Caesarea before he returned to Jerusalem (9:32-11:2). The evangelistic zeal of the Jerusalem church is further seen in the following: when it heard that some of its dispersed members had established the church in Syrian Antioch, it sent Barnabas (introduced to us most favorably in 4:36-37; cf. 9:26-27) to help those babes in Christ and add to their evangelistic efforts (11:22-30).

The Jerusalem church begins to recede into the background at this point in Luke's account, as the Gospel spread from Jerusalem to Judea, then to Samaria, and to the uttermost part of the earth, even as the Lord ordained (1:8). But let us never forget where it began, and the evangelistic work of the Jerusalem church that made it happen. If Jerusalem had failed, the Lord's plan would have been short-circuited from the start.

As it was then, so it is now—no church can begin without evangelism. Moreover, no church can prosper and grow, either spiritually or numerically, without evangelistic fervor. Evangelism—preaching and teaching the Gospel—is verily the lifeblood of the church! This responsibility is not merely that of elders, deacons, and preachers, but one laid upon us all.

While we may fault the Jerusalem church for confining its efforts only to Jerusalem, until forced to do otherwise by persecution, in which city anywhere during the past two hundred years have enemies of the cause pointed to us and accused us of filling it with the doctrine of Christ? Jerusalem stands as a noble example of evangelistic zeal for us in this distant age.

Interesting Facts Concerning The Early Years In Jerusalem

Besides all of the praiseworthy traits of the Jerusalem saints, there are likewise some interesting facts

concerning the church in its early days that are neither praiseworthy nor blameworthy in and of themselves. However, there are some things we can learn from these facts.

It Was A Large Church

The Jerusalem church, with three thousand members on its first day of existence (Acts 2:41), was larger than any other congregation of the Lord's people in this century of which this writer is aware. For at least some time, it appears that there were daily additions to it, bringing its number to about five thousand (counting only the men) in only a short time (4:4). Its membership is called a "multitude" (4:32), to which "were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women" (5:14). The numbers continued to multiply "exceedingly" even beyond these descriptions (6:1,7).

It is thrilling to read of this explosive numerical increase among a people who were fully dedicated to the Truth. Surely every faithful saint longs to see such growth duplicated. Among other things we can deduce from the size of the Jerusalem congregation is that it is certainly in harmony with God's will for congregations to attain largeness. In fact, in the very nature of the case, ideally each congregation should ever seek to become larger **as long as it is determined to do so by preaching the Gospel and maintaining its loyalty to the same.** There is most definitely no virtue in smallness merely for the smallness' sake.

However, we quickly point out that neither is there virtue in largeness merely for the largeness' sake. The church is cursed in these modern times with many brethren who do not understand this and who appear to be more zealous for numerical growth than for the Lord and His Truth. There are numerous congregations still

calling themselves a “church of Christ” who have five hundred or more members, and a few which have one thousand or more on their rolls. Alas, in most cases, these have not attained their size by uncompromisingly preaching the Gospel and following the New Testament pattern for the church. So very many of them have retreated from a strong stand for righteousness and the Truth, have adopted denominational practices, and have gone to denominational sources to learn “how to grow a church.”

These congregations have swelled in numbers all right, but at a terrible price in most cases. Adulterous marriages, sometimes even among elders, deacons, and teachers, are winked at and tolerated. People are accepted into fellowship, not on the basis of their obedience to the Lord’s plan of salvation, but on their denominational membership. The straightforward Bible preaching that once universally characterized our pulpits has been scrapped by these churches in favor of insipid fifteen or twenty-minute sound bites composed of a few stories and illustrations borrowed from the pop-psychology, make-me-feel-good-about-myself culture. Their pulpits are open only to men of liberal bent among us and, more and more, to denominational preachers (not that there is much difference between the two).

While there is neither vice nor virtue in largeness or smallness, it impossible to ignore the fact that there are far more large churches (even those with 250 members and larger) which have apostatized than small churches. One can hardly keep from observing that, the larger a congregation becomes, at least in modern times, the greater the tendency exists for it to digress and apostatize. Or, perhaps, the numerical growth of these congregations has come in direct proportion to the number of compromises they have made. Whichever may be the case, it is

undisputed that a large membership and doctrinal looseness have a very close affinity. We are not saying this affinity **must** exist, for Jerusalem is a case in point proving otherwise. We are simply saying it does exist in these days. It is worthy of observation that the Jerusalem church did not set out to grow large as an end. Rather, it grew as a direct result of preaching the Gospel, which attracted the multitudes. The apostles did not have an Easter pageant, a Broadway production, or a “non-judgmental” message inviting sinners to come and feel comfortable in their sins in order to “grow the church.” They did not build a gymnasium, call it a “family life center,” and use basketball and volleyball as opportunities to “witness” to their “unchurched” friends. Those pitiable apostles knew nothing better to do than to preach the Gospel!

Was the Jerusalem congregation’s explosive growth intended to serve as a pattern for every congregation? Some apparently believe thus and attempt to lay a “guilt trip” on the leadership of any congregation that has not achieved such. We beg to differ for at least the following reasons:

1. *The astounding response to the Gospel in Jerusalem had unique preparation,* as discussed at some length in our earlier introductory remarks. God had been preparing for centuries for the Jerusalem responses that occurred on Pentecost and soon thereafter. For this reason alone, there will never be another Pentecost, and there will never be another congregation that will begin and grow as dramatically as the Jerusalem church did.

2. *The great positive response to the Gospel was attended by a unique outpouring and demonstration of the Holy Spirit.* The apostles were baptized in (overwhelmed by) the Spirit, as the Lord had promised they would be (John 14-16). The sights and sounds which surrounded the outpouring of the Spirit upon the twelve

attracted a great throng of people to them. Their ability to speak in various languages which they obviously had not studied amazed the crowd and prepared their hearts to be receptive to the inspired explanation of those phenomena. These were underscored by the apostles' continued demonstration of the mighty power with which they were endued, as they worked many signs and wonders which proved the verity and source of their message (Acts 2:43; 3:1-11; 4:14-16; 5:12-16; cf. Mark 16:17-18; John 3:2; Heb. 2:3-4).

3. *The events which led up to and surrounded Passover and the Lord's crucifixion* (i.e., the triumphal entry, the "last supper," His arrest and trials, the Jews' ugly demonstrations outside Pilate's Praetorium, the release of Barabbas, the procession to Golgotha, the crucifixion itself, the "rumors" of His resurrection) ***were all still uniquely fresh in the minds of the vast audience addressed by the twelve on Pentecost and in the days that immediately followed.*** (While only the apostles and a few others were privy to some of these events, most of the people were doubtlessly familiar with most of them.) Cleopas' words to the Lord on the Emmaus Road demonstrate how utterly consumed with these events all of the people in and around Jerusalem were: "Dost thou alone sojourn in Jerusalem and not know the things which are come to pass there in these days?" (Luke 24:18).

We know that the people were searching for an explanation of the miraculous events they saw and heard on Pentecost itself (Acts 2:6-8, 12-13). They must also have been laboring to put **all** of the remarkable events of the past fifty days into perspective as well (Luke 24:19-24). For the first time, all of the loose ends in these spectacular events were tied together by the apostles in the first Gospel sermon ever to instruct men concerning the fullness of remission of sins through the crucified, resurrected,

glorified Son of God—the Messiah of their prophets and the same Jesus of Nazareth Whose death they had demanded! The extensive positive response evoked by the message on Pentecost, and in the days immediately thereafter in Jerusalem, is clearly tied to the immediate dramatic background of the events of the almost two months leading up to it.

4. *No such overwhelming response in a brief time span at any other location is recorded in all of the New Testament.* This is so, in spite of the fact that the apostles preached the same powerful Gospel and verified it by miraculous powers and signs everywhere they went. This all leads to the conclusion that the events which produced the astounding response to the Gospel in Jerusalem were onetime circumstances that never will or can be repeated. There is surely no “pattern” for congregational growth or size to be deduced from them.

Many factors affect the response men will make to the Gospel in any given time or place. As zealous, dedicated, and determined as Paul was, he met with varied responses in various places, but he never met with such astounding success as the twelve did in Jerusalem. An important fact for all who preach the Gospel and for all who serve as elders is that we are not sent “to baptize, but to preach the gospel” (1 Cor. 1:17). The success of our efforts cannot be measured merely by the number who respond to our work, although we should ever strive to pierce the sinful heart with the Spirit’s sword. In America we are presently in circumstances where hearts are generally unreceptive to the Gospel. But, in other areas of the world (e.g., India), some thirst for it and respond in large numbers. If the Lord delays His coming the day may (and hopefully will) come when the hearts of our countrymen will once more be more receptive to the Truth, as they were even a few decades ago. But we err if we judge our efforts and the response of people to them by the occurrences in the infancy of the Jerusalem church.

It Was A Disciplined Church

The first case of “church discipline” is observed in the early days of the Jerusalem church’s existence (Acts 5:1-11). Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, sold some land and conspired to give part of it to the church, while stating that they were giving it all. Their sin was not in keeping part of it, but in lying about giving it all. Although they appeared to utter their lie only to the apostles (and perhaps in the presence of some others), Peter indicted them for actually lying to the Holy Spirit. They were “disciplined” by being struck dead as they respectively came before the apostles with their lies.⁷ This stroke of discipline both purified the church and put all of the brethren on notice concerning God’s intolerance of such deception. The result was that “great fear came upon the whole church, and upon all that heard these things” (vv. 5,11).

Luke does not say whether God directly or indirectly (through Peter) struck them down, but in either case He was behind it. At the very least, Peter was involved in the act by miraculously discerning that they lied and by boldly exposing and condemning their lie. While there is no Biblical record of a subsequent case of “discipline by death,” there are numerous passages through which the Holy Spirit obligates local congregations to discipline their members by severing fellowship with them if they will not repent (Matt. 18:15-17; Rom. 16:17-18; 1 Cor. 5; 2 Thess. 3:6,14-15). It would appear that God used this severe (by human judgment) measure of discipline in Jerusalem to impress upon the church from its beginning that He intended for His church to be kept pure. Church leaders still should remember the case of Ananias and Sapphira when they are tempted to ignore the clear scriptural mandates to withdraw from the disorderly.

It Was A Tried Church

The Lord persistently warned those who followed Him that they would be persecuted (Matt. 5:10-12,44; 10:16-39; 24:9; John 15:20). The apostles likely experienced this

to some degree as they carried out the limited commission (Matt. 10:14-15). It was undoubtedly for fear of persecution that all of the apostles fled upon the Lord's arrest and that Peter denied the Lord at His trials (Mark 14:50,66-72; cf. Matt. 26:31-35). However, the first extensive persecution came upon the Jerusalem church in its early days. The initial wave appears to have been instigated by the Sadducean Party of the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:1-2). Peter and John were arrested, jailed, and, at their hearing, threatened if they continued to preach (vv. 3-22). When they continued to preach and do their mighty signs, the Sadducees orchestrated an arrest of, apparently, all of the apostles (5:17-18). Before their hearing, they were released by the Lord's angel, after which they went right back to the temple and resumed their preaching (vv. 19-26), likely infuriating the council even further. The court wanted to kill them, and might have done so had Gamaliel not intervened (vv. 33-40a). The councilors settled for beating the apostles and once more warning them "not to speak in the name of Jesus," after which "they ceased not to teach and to preach Jesus as the Christ" (vv. 40b-42).

Stephen, one of the seven men chosen to serve the needs of the widows, so mightily confounded and refuted some of the Jews that they brought him before the court, then hired false witnesses against him, and finally stoned him to death (7:54-60). Saul of Tarsus, who had consented to Stephen's death, then launched a wave of fiery, severe persecution against the church in general that forced most of the saints to flee for their lives (8:1-3). Sometime later, King Herod decided to afflict the church by killing the apostle James and imprisoning Peter until a convenient time came to dispatch him (12:1-4). In answer to the earnest prayers of the brethren, the Lord's angel freed him and allowed him to flee the city (vv. 5-17).

The church suffered much but weathered these painful experiences and was the stronger for it. The apostles boldly withstood the arrests, threats, and beatings of the council. They rejoiced in their sufferings and boldly continued to preach the Word (4:19-20,29-31; 5:29-32,41-42). We are given little information about the reaction of brethren when Saul began his terrible onslaught against them following Stephen, but Luke gives no hint that they compromised in the face of peril.

When the pressure became so great that most of the brethren had to flee for their lives, they scattered to Judea, Samaria, Phoenicia, Cyprus, and even faraway Syrian Antioch (Acts 8:1; 11:19). With their dispersion, the seed of the kingdom was broadcast far and wide, for they “went about preaching the word” (8:4). Preaching of the Gospel to every nation was what the Lord had ordered (Matt. 28:19; Mark 16:15), but the brethren had been content to preach it only in Jerusalem before Saul’s rampage. It thus appears that the saints had to be **forced** to leave Jerusalem and execute the great commission. Although God did not actively cause His people to suffer, He used their sufferings to bless the world by getting the Gospel to them. Likewise, World War II, which brought death, destruction, and suffering to millions of people, caused the Lord’s people serving in the armed forces to be scattered to many areas of Asia and Europe, and with them went the Gospel. Out of that tragedy many were taught the Truth and obeyed the Gospel, and many congregations were established. Sadly, the Lord’s people at times have had to be almost forced by severe persecution or the tragedy of war to obey His orders! Could the indifference in the church today toward the lost be possibly inviting another wave of great suffering and tragedy?

There are a few areas of the world today where the church must meet in secret for fear of reprisal. There have

always been, and continue to be, isolated cases of persecution of the faithful. However, for the most part, the Lord's people, though not always accepted with open arms by those around them, have not experienced widespread, planned, officially sponsored physical oppression and persecution over the past fifty years. This has especially been so in our nation, which was founded by men who believed in the God of the Bible, that the Bible was the Word of God, and that "Christianity" (as they comprehended it) was the only true religion. But now, men and women in places of great power deny all of the above and are striving to eliminate God and the Bible from the nation's consciousness.

Popular philosophy and the culture it has spawned have been so much captured by atheism and hedonism that they not only tolerate, but champion, the most egregious evil and immorality. The only thing they cannot tolerate is any voice raised against their lying, fornication, adultery, homosexuality, and other such despicable behavior! The more power such forces get, the more pressure they will place upon any who dare speak against their "right" to thus act.

How long will it be until a homosexual (male or female) demands membership and the "right" to preach in a congregation of the Lord's people? Or how long will it be until a woman argues that her "civil rights" are being violated by not being allowed to be appointed an elder in a local congregation? When (not if) this happens, and the ACLU jumps with glee to their defense, given the liberal judges in federal courts and the rulings they have made favoring almost every liberal cause in recent years, the outcome is predictable. Mainline denominations have for the most part caved in to the "in-your-face" tactics of the rabid homosexual and radical feminist activists. Most of them surrendered their officerships and pulpits long ago

to the “women’s libbers” with hardly a protest. The homosexuals are now doing the same thing, and, one by one, the morally and scripturally bankrupt denominations are yielding to them rather than resisting them. Whether out of an unwillingness to face the possible reprisals of court judgments against them or out of misplaced sympathy for men and women unwilling to repent of abominable behavior, most of the major denominations have acquiesced.

When these ungodly elements begin their concentrated assault on Zion, we need to be prepared for real persecution—we will be tried if we stand! When a judge or the Supreme Court orders a congregation to admit a homosexual as a member or to appoint a woman as an elder, it will not be without consequence if it refuses to comply. Reprisals (persecution) will follow, which could consist of stiff fines and/or seizure of church property and assets, and/or even prison time for elders and preachers. If the radical liberal and atheistic educators and politicians have their way, it will one day be illegal to even preach against homosexual behavior or to write the words the reader is presently reading, much less resist their ambition to infiltrate and pollute every stratum of society and every public and private institution. Perhaps, in His providence, the Lord will soon decide that their cup of iniquity is now filled and they will be brought down to defeat. However, unless something prevents the continued increases in the influence of evil men in our nation, the day will surely come when those who dare rebuke their evil deeds, by word or deed, will be made to pay dearly for it.

We need to understand, if we do not already, that, ironically, persecution has characteristically served to strengthen, rather than weaken, the church. The persecution suffered by the apostles in Jerusalem made both them and the brethren who saw their determined

faith even stronger (Acts 4:23-32; 5:17-25,40-42). Although the Gospel is God's saving power (Rom. 1:16), doubtlessly the boldness of the preaching of the apostles in Jerusalem, even after being arrested, threatened, and beaten, broke the hard hearts of many (perhaps even of the priests!—Acts 6:7), enabling the Gospel seed to enter and germinate.

When the disciples were scattered from Jerusalem by Saul's campaign of terror against them, they did not slink away in silence and fear, but boldly preached the Gospel everywhere they went (8:4). The willingness of Christians to suffer great loss and pain, even to the point of death for the sake of Christ (Rev. 2:10), strengthens the church in at least two ways: (1) As indicated above, such faithful resolve causes some unbelievers to consider seriously a cause for which people are willing to suffer and die. Some of these will obey the Gospel. (2) The members who merely "play church" are weeded out, as only the stalwart saints pass the test (those who will not live for Christ will certainly not die for Him in the hour of trial!). Many among the elect are consumed with apathy, selfishness, compromise, and worldliness. Their hearts are in the world, and their lives show it. Although persecution thus causes the church to decrease in numbers, it is thereby made no weaker, but is actually increased in real strength. The blood of martyrs has always served to fertilize the seed of the kingdom. We know not whether the Lord will let another great wave of persecution against His people sweep over the earth. However, we know that, in the Jerusalem saints, we have a great pattern for our behavior should such come.

A Lamentable Development In Jerusalem's Later Years

The New Testament not only warns us about persecution, but it also warns us repeatedly about the ever-

present danger of apostasy and digression. In its beginning, as earlier noted, the church in Jerusalem “continued stedfastly in the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42). Unfortunately, this was not always to be so of every member. The Jerusalem congregation was from the start composed almost completely, if not altogether, of Jews (2:5; 21:20b). Among those who obeyed the Gospel was “a great company of the priests” (6:7), many of whom were likely Pharisees. Jerusalem had been the Jews’ civil and religious capital for a millennium. The Law of Moses (at least their interpretations of it through the rabbis) was so ingrained in their nature that they found it all but inconceivable to accept the end of its authority (21:20b). Moreover, the rite of circumcision, stretching all the way back to their father Abraham and reinforced in Mosaic Law as a sign of their national and religious identity, was, to the vast majority of them, an irrevocable ordinance (21:21). The general attitude of Jews toward all non-Jews—Gentiles—was one of condescension (at best) and abhorrence (at worst). These attitudes did not die easily in the Jewish heart, even among those who obeyed the Gospel.

Consequently, a strong party grew up in the Jerusalem church based upon loyalty to the Law and to circumcision. They taught, “Except ye be circumcised after the custom of Moses, ye cannot be saved” (15:1). They were still trying to observe the Law and were practicing circumcision themselves, but they were determined that the Gentiles must do the same. They were “legalists” in the worst sense of the term, binding laws which God had not bound—in this case binding laws which God had abolished (Eph. 2:14-16; Col. 2:14; Heb. 10:9-10). They actually added another act of obedience—circumcision—to the Gospel plan of Salvation! Furthermore, as is often the case with those who advocate a false view, this party was extremely vocal and zealous. While we do not have a

record of all of the places they took their “gospel of circumcision,” we can trace the routes of some of them by means of Paul’s opposition to and exposure of them in most of his epistles (Rom. 2:28; 1 Cor. 7:18-19; 2 Cor. 11:13,22; Gal. 2:11-14; 5:1-4; Eph. 2:14-16; Phil. 3:2-3; Col. 2:8-17; 1 Tim. 1:3-4,6-7; Tit. 1:10; Heb. 3:12-14).

Paul alluded to the fact that “certain came from James (in Jerusalem, DM)” to Antioch, whom Cephas correctly feared were “of the circumcision (party)” (Gal. 2:12). Luke apparently records the same incident: “And certain men came down from Judaea and taught the brethren, saying, Except ye be circumcised after the custom of Moses, ye cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). Paul wrote of his going up to Jerusalem with Barnabas and Titus for somewhat of a “showdown” with the circumcision party (Gal. 2:1-10). Luke described the same occasion:

And when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and questioning with them, the brethren appointed that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question (Acts 15:2).

Acts 15 is devoted almost completely to the great discussion that occurred in Jerusalem over whether the Law, particularly circumcision, would be bound upon Christians. Luke specifically identifies the source of these Judaistic contentions: “But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees who believed, saying, It is needful to circumcise them, and to charge them to keep the law of Moses” (v. 5). Some of the Pharisees who had been baptized were more devoted to their old sect than they were to the Christ and His Word! While not all of the Jerusalem church was of this sentiment, a significant and vocal part of it certainly was. To Peter’s credit, he “learned his lesson”

from Paul's rebuke of him in Antioch (Gal. 2:11-16). He set out the issue plainly that the Law was not to be bound on the Gentiles, and James, one of the elders, argued the same. Under the direction of the inspired apostles, a letter to the Gentiles was drafted and sent by Paul, Barnabas, and others disclaiming any sponsorship of the circumcision sect (Acts 15:22-29).

Although the entire church was not of the sentiment of these "Pharisee Christians," they wielded a great amount of influence by their boldness and indefatigable spread of their doctrine. They made enough noise to leave the impression that the whole church agreed with them—a favorite bluffing tactic of false teachers.

It is disappointing that the apostles still in Jerusalem and the Jerusalem elders did not expose and silence the false teachers among them long before the dramatic meeting was required. Had they acted with the same dispatch concerning this problem that was seen in them when the Grecian widows were being neglected a few years earlier (Acts 6:1-6), churches all over the world could have been spared much grief. Peter likely failed to act out of fear (Gal. 2:12). We do not know why James failed.

Here we have a case in point of a neglected problem in a congregation reaching crisis proportions unnecessarily because it was not dealt with in its inception. This doctrinal problem grew to the point of endangering, not only the Jerusalem church, but the church all over the world! Had it not been for the absolutely uncompromising stand of Paul and Barnabas (but principally Paul—Gal. 2:13b), it appears that the other apostles and the Jerusalem elders would not have withstood the false teachers. Had these Pharisees carried the day, much of the church—perhaps most of the Jewish members—would have been lost to Judaism. The Hebrews letter was addressed to a group of Jewish saints who were on the very verge of elevating Moses' Law above the Gospel.

What can we learn from these sad events relating to Jerusalem?

1. It is not enough to begin well; we must continue and finish well.
2. Christians can apostatize, even when inspired apostles are among them.
3. Although inspired and infallible in their teaching, the apostles were capable of sin.
4. If Peter were the first pope, he set a sorry precedent for succeeding ones.
5. Small church problems, if not dealt with early, can become very large problems.
6. False teachers cannot be coddled; they and their doctrine must be confronted.
7. Loud-mouthed false teachers can wield influence out of proportion to their numbers.
8. Elders have a responsibility to feed, watch out for, and protect the church.
9. Only one or two stalwart saints can sometimes prevail over error and sin.
10. When the Truth is at stake we must never give ground.

Conclusion

One of the most exciting bits of history ever recorded is that of the beginning and growth of the church of Christ in Jerusalem as the Gospel was first preached. Let us emulate all of her exemplary traits. Let us learn from observations relating to her early experiences. Let us beware of the trap into which she fell that we may help spare congregations the same problems she suffered with false teachers.

Endnotes

1 All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

2 Henri Daniel-Rops, **Daily Life in the Time of Jesus** (New York, NY: Hawthorn Books, 1962), pp. 92,101.

3 By the expression, “in the temple,” we are not to understand within the walls of the temple building itself. “The temple” must here and elsewhere be understood as a reference to the paved acreage of the temple grounds which was enclosed by the vast retaining walls made of mammoth hewn stones (see Acts 5:20,25,42). Thus, the “pinnacle of the temple” from which Satan challenged Jesus to jump (Matt. 4:5) was not the roof of the temple building, but the highest point of the retaining wall (the southeast corner or wing) of the temple area, several times higher than the roof of the temple proper. On the word “pinnacle” in the passage above, the ASV has a footnote which reads “wing.” Likewise the “door of the temple which is called Beautiful” (Acts 3:2) is actually a gate in the wall through which one entered the temple grounds from the east. One of the prominent areas of the Herodian temple grounds was “the porch of Solomon” (v. 11). This “porch” was a large plaza east of the temple building with a roof supported by a lengthy colonnade. Interestingly, John writes that, on one occasion, “Jesus was walking in the temple in Solomon’s porch (John 10:23). Note that he locates the porch “in the temple,” clearly meaning in the temple grounds. There was sufficient room for several thousand to gather in the temple courts. It is likely that this is where the vast throng came together to hear the first Gospel sermon (Acts 2:6). The Jerusalem brethren, who numbered three thousand from the beginning and then grew and multiplied, required far more space than any building in Jerusalem could provide. However, there was sufficient room in the temple area for their meetings, and this was their place of assembly.

4 While we are not informed by Luke about the circumstances which produced such an apparently large number of people in so much need, we offer the following for consideration: at least some of those 3,000 who obeyed the Gospel on Pentecost and of those thousands who were subsequently added to the church in its earliest days were pilgrims from far-flung areas (Acts 2:5–11). As earlier indicated, many of these travelers likely came for the Passover, intending to wait until

after Pentecost to begin their homeward journeys. Upon their obedience to the Gospel, we suppose that at least some, if not many, of these new Christians decided to stay in Jerusalem longer than originally planned (some perhaps permanently) to remain among their new brethren. Assuming they had budgeted sufficient money and provisions only for their original plans, these would soon be exhausted by their extended sojourns. The men of these families would be without jobs with which to earn money to care for their families and would thus be dependent upon the mercies of their brethren until they could secure employment. The (implied) sizeable group of widows may have developed because a number of the men among these pilgrims died during the fifty-day visit to Jerusalem or during the extended stay of these new saints, thus leaving widows and children stranded away from home and destitute. It was almost impossible for a woman to find honorable employment in those days, and, if she had children, her problems were compounded. Away from home and from relatives to help her, she was even more dependent upon the mercies of others. Whether or not the foregoing explanations have merit, the problem of poverty in Jerusalem, especially among the saints, was severe and long-lasting as indicated by subsequent references and responses to it years later (Acts 24:17; Rom. 15:26-27; 1 Cor. 16:1-3; 2 Cor. 8-9).

5 This is our conviction for several reasons: (1) If these were actually deacons we would have a case of the appointment of deacons in the absence of elders. There is no New Testament record of the appointment of deacons prior to or in the absence of elders, unless this case in Jerusalem is the exception (which we do not believe it to be). We do not read of any elders, even in the area of Jerusalem, until a few years later, and then the general area of Judea, rather than Jerusalem, is specified (although we grant that it is most likely that the earliest elders in Judea would have been in the Jerusalem church) (Acts 11:29-30). (2) If these men were "official" deacons, then we have two different sets of qualifications for this "office." The qualifications for the men in Acts 6 are considerably different from those specifically given for deacons in 1 Timothy 3. (3) Neither Luke nor any other New Testament writer refers to the seven men in Acts 6 as "deacons."

6 It would help if each congregation had some person who could readily be reached delegated to handle such requests for help. We also suggest that each congregation decide on a set of guidelines for responding to calls for help, especially those of the “drop-in” type. These should include a forthright questionnaire for each applicant which asks if they drink, use drugs, use tobacco, gamble, etc. It is also appropriate to ask one's religious affiliation and if he or she will study the Bible with us. If the person seeking help is a Methodist, it is reasonable to ask if he or she has sought help from his or her own and, if not, why not. While we are not opposed, as a matter of principle, to congregations helping unbelievers, each congregation has limited resources which should primarily be used to help the brethren (Gal. 6:10).

7 We can but wonder how decimated the ranks of the Lord's army might be if the Lord still thus dealt with all His children who lie either explicitly or implicitly concerning their income and their obligation to God to use their prosperity to advance the kingdom. Many are they who are so captivated by materialism that they live as kings during the week and give as paupers on the Lord's day, thus implicitly lying about their ability to give according to their prosperity (1 Cor. 16:2).

CHAPTER 5

Lessons From The Church At Antioch

Wayne Cox

Introduction

WITHOUT QUESTION, THE CHURCH of Christ is the greatest institution on earth. Granted, there are manmade organizations productive of much good, yet none are comparable to the body of Christ—it has no rival! The church did not come about by accident or chance, nor was it an invention of man. God Almighty had it in His eternal mind to prepare, plan, and plant His church over which Christ would be head and in which are all the saved.

What a great beginning the church had on that eventful Pentecost Day in A.D. 33! Then, three thousand penitent believers were baptized into the body as a result of their heeding the Gospel call. Having experienced the new birth, these disciples knew that not only were they saved from sin, but were also saved to serve (1 Thess. 1:9). They were called out of the world and set apart for the Master's use.

The early church was instrumental in abounding “in the work of the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58). Their main mission was to glorify God through the three primary avenues of (1) seeking the lost (Mark 16:15-16), (2) serving the suffering (Jas. 1:27), and (3) strengthening the saved (Rom. 14:19). As they went about doing good and performing their assigned work, the church grew rapidly: first at Jerusalem,

then through other cities in the vicinity, and eventually into other regions. They were following the mandate Christ had given, which, in essence, serves as an outline of the book of Acts:

But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem [Acts 1 – 7], and in all Judaea [Acts 8 – 12], and unto the uttermost part of the earth [Acts 13 – 28] (Acts 1:8).

How thankful we ought to be for the birth and growth of the church, and that we have the grand privilege of being a part of the beautiful bride of Christ today! To God be the glory for His infinite wisdom, mercy, and love seen in the establishment, perpetuation, and eventual salvation of the redeemed in the body!

We also need to be grateful that there are, in the inspired Record, historical accounts of a number of congregations of the Lord's church, some of which challenge the best that is in us. They are what the church ought to be in every place. The church of Christ in Antioch in Syria is one example of such a congregation. Here, disciples were first called Christians. Here, selfless benevolence was extended to suffering saints. Here, Barnabas and Paul worked for a year. Here was Paul's hub and headquarters for much of his vast missionary work. What encouragement it must have been to have been a member of the Antioch church of Christ! What an example she sets for us today! What a thrill it is to review, in this lecture, her history, and what lessons we glean from her work and worship!

Our assigned lesson objectives for this chapter are as follows: (1) provide background information regarding the time and establishment of this congregation; (2)

emphasize the strengths of this church, including things they did well, worthy of our imitation today; and (3) point out the weaknesses of these believers, observing things they did wrong which we should avoid today.

Background Information

The City¹

“Antioch” designates two cities in the New Testament: Antioch in Syria and Antioch in Pisidia. Of the two, Syrian Antioch was by far the predominant city and is the one under consideration in our study.

The city of Antioch was founded in 300 B.C. by Seleucius I Nicator, who named the city after his father, Antiochus.² Antioch grew rapidly, and, as of the first century, was the third largest city in the Roman Empire, following only Rome and Alexandria in size and wealth.³ It was a busy commercial center and capital of the Roman province of Syria;⁴ here, the Syrian kings resided.⁵ Like Rome and Alexandria, Antioch had a large Jewish community,⁶ for here the Jews received citizenship rights that were equal to those of the Greeks.⁷ In Antioch, the Jews had their synagogues, taught the Law and the Prophets on the Sabbath, and even evangelized the local population.⁸

Unfortunately, Antioch was known more for its vices than its virtues. Lloyd John Ogilvie comments:

The culture of this metropolitan city at the mouth of the Orontes River was Greek. Strategically located fifteen miles from the Mediterranean Sea, Antioch had become very cosmopolitan. But something else had made the very name of the city synonymous with rampant immorality. In this “sin city,” chariot racing,

gambling, and debauchery took priority in the persistent pursuit of pleasure. And controlling the ambience was the worship of Daphne, whose temple five miles out of the city housed prostitute priestesses. Apollo's famous pursuit of Daphne in the laurel groves around what became the site of the temple was reenacted night and day by the "worshippers" and the ritual prostitutes. The phrase "the morals of Daphne" became descriptive through the world of immorality at this time.⁹

What a formidable place to begin a congregation of the Lord's church! Yet, what other hope did the populace ever have of changing for the better apart from Christ and His Gospel?

The historian Luke was not all that concerned with the aforementioned facts about Antioch, as he focuses in Acts, not on the town, but on the church established there.

The Church—Establishment

When Stephen was martyred, a great wave of persecution against Christians arose, which scattered believers into the regions of Judaea and Samaria (Acts 8:1-4). Eventually, the Gospel was sown up the Mediterranean coast to Phoenicia, then to the island of Cyprus, then as far north as Antioch:

Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen travelled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only (11:19).

The persecuted believers who had traveled the three hundred miles from Jerusalem to Antioch carried with

them the Truth of the Gospel of Christ; however, initially they targeted only the Jews. Perhaps they were unaware of Peter's experience with Cornelius and that the Gospel was for all—Jew and Gentile alike. Coffman states:

Despite the fact of the great commission having been intended for "all nations," the first Christians, almost exclusively Jewish in a racial sense, understood this as "all Jewish nations"! It was this fundamental misunderstanding which lasted several years, and which precipitated the supernatural events leading to the inclusion of Gentiles. The whole purpose of Christianity would have been nullified and thwarted if the world-saving gospel should have been reduced to the status of another Jewish sect; and there was no way that Almighty God would have permitted such a thing.¹⁰

Thankfully, other Christians from Cyprus and Cyrene, "when they were come to Antioch, spake unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord Jesus" (Acts 11:20). Now, the Gentiles at Antioch had an opportunity to hear the message and heed it, which they did: "And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord" (11:21).

Thus began in Antioch a congregation of the church of Christ. How was it established? The Word was preached, and the Word was obeyed—we cannot improve upon this God-given formula! There can be no substitute for teaching the Gospel, for it alone is the "drawing card" to salvation (John 6:44); neither can we improvise when it comes to our response to it. That which made Christians at Antioch then is that which will make Christians any and everywhere today—nothing more, nothing less, and nothing else!

The church at Antioch would eventually become the launching pad for the Gospel's being sent to the uttermost part of the world. How appropriate, then, for us to examine in survey fashion both the strengths and weaknesses of what Scripture reveals about this congregation; may we profit in so doing.

Strengths Of The Church At Antioch

A Taught Church

Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem: and they sent forth Barnabas, that he should go as far as Antioch. Who, when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord. For he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith: and much people was added unto the Lord. Then departed Barnabas to Tarsus, for to seek Saul: And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch (Acts 11:22-26).

The church at Jerusalem could have become jealous of the good news at Antioch, but their reaction was, "Let's help them!" This they did by sending their top man, Barnabas the exhorter. Upon his arrival, and through his efforts, the congregation grew: "much people was added to the Lord." Realizing the task was too big for him alone, Barnabas sought the aid of the now-converted, zealous Saul; he brought him to Antioch where they lived, labored, and taught the church for an entire year.

Though these at Antioch were Christians by virtue of Gospel obedience, they were at the same time novices, and needed to grow in the faith. Barnabas and Saul would strengthen them by giving further instruction from the Word. Is there not a lesson in this for us today? How many converts are brought to Christ, converted, and then forgotten with no additional teaching and encouragement? Might not this be one reason why so many readily fall away from the faith? Let's teach and baptize and teach some more!

Observe also that Barnabas and Saul were willing to teach and that the church was willing to be taught—such is an unbeatable combination when it comes to acquiring knowledge! No doubt, the teachers were excited about teaching and the hearers were excited about learning—none considered the Word to be dull, drab, or dead. The disciples both learned the Truth and then lived it out in their lives.

Jonathan Edwards, believed to have spent some thirteen hours a day in study, spoke of the correlation between teaching and learning:

You are all called to be Christians, and this is your profession. Endeavour, therefore, to acquire knowledge in things which pertain to your profession. Let not your teachers have cause to complain, that while they spend and are spent, to impart knowledge to you, you take little pains to learn. It is a great encouragement to an instructor, to have such to teach as make a business of learning, bending their minds to it. This makes teaching a pleasure, when otherwise it will be a very heavy and burdensome task.¹¹

Because the disciples at Antioch were taught the Truth and lived the Truth, they were called Christians

(Acts 11:26). The name “Christian” was of Divine origin,¹² as is evident from Isaiah’s prophecy: “And the Gentiles shall see thy righteousness, and all kings thy glory: and thou shalt be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord shall name” (Isa. 62:2). A Christian was what Agrippa was almost persuaded to be (Acts 26:28) and is the name whereby we glorify God (1 Pet. 4:16). This was the name some were blaspheming in James’ day (Jas. 2:7), as well as in ours.

Religious names such as Baptist, Catholic, Adventist, Lutheran, Methodist, Mormon, Presbyterian, et al., were totally foreign to the believers at Antioch and ought to be to us also. We plead with all to discard party names, since such designations breed division and bring glory to man rather than to Christ.

A Benevolent Church

The young church at Antioch demonstrated their love to needy believers in Jerusalem by taking up a collection for them—even before the need became a reality:

And in these days came prophets from Jerusalem unto Antioch. And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and signified by the Spirit that there should be great dearth throughout all the world: which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar.¹³ Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judaea: Which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul (Acts 11:27-30).

The unselfish and benevolent spirit of these believers is remarkable, especially considering that the most mature of them was only a few years old in the Lord. Plus, many

of these were Gentile converts to Christianity, now sacrificing for Jewish Christians. Both ethnic groups had, prior to their conversion, hated and despised each other for so long.¹⁴ However, upon conversion, their animosity toward each other was buried with the old man of sin.

To emulate the disciples at Antioch, we too must be benevolent. As one has said, “People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”¹⁵ To be benevolent, we must have a generous and compassionate heart, and be willing to give, as did they. One of the ways we demonstrate our love for God and others is through sacrificial giving. As Paul exhorted:

But this I say, He which soweth sparingly shall also reap sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall also reap bountifully. Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver (2 Cor. 9:6-7).

The word “cheerful” in the original language is one from which we derive our English term “hilarious.”¹⁶ Paul says we ought to get the thrill of a lifetime out of giving—not to give until it hurts, but to give until it feels good! The brethren at Antioch demonstrated selfless, “hilarious” giving to meet the needs of suffering saints in Judaea.

But, what about us? What is our attitude toward benevolence and giving? Sadly, some give grudgingly—that is, reluctantly; they give with tears in their eyes as they part with even the smallest amount. They hate to give up a part of their income, due, to a large extent, greed. It is said that African natives have an ingenious way of catching monkeys. The natives will bore a small hole in a coconut, remove the fruit, and then place meat in the now hollow shell. The baited coconut is attached by rope to a tree. The monkey will reach into the coconut, draw out a small

amount, and sample the meat. Upon finding it delicious, he again reaches inside the coconut, grabs a fistful of meat, but now cannot retrieve his hand since his clenched fist is now full. Instead of releasing the meat and freeing himself, the monkey, due to greed, remains trapped. It seems that some brethren have the same quality of avarice as does the monkey—their fists are clenched so tightly around their money that they are not about to part with it, regardless of the consequences. Theirs is, in stark contrast to those of Antioch, in no way cheerful giving nor a spirit of benevolence.

An Unprejudiced And United Church

Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul (Acts 13:1).

Five people are mentioned in this verse as being prophets and teachers, all reflecting a great diversity of backgrounds. Barnabas was a Jew from the tribe of Levi (4:36) and from the island of Cyprus. Simeon also had the name “Niger,” which, according to Harrison, was “a Latin term meaning ‘black-skinned.’”¹⁷ Lucius was from Cyrene, west of Egypt on the coast of Africa.¹⁸ Manaen was a man of high social standing, having been brought up¹⁹ with Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee and Perea. Saul completes the list, the Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia. He represents those who had been opposed to the church, having done all he could to destroy it. Now, however, he is a vital part of the body due to the effective power of the Gospel in his life.

A Cyprian Jew, a black man, a Gentile, an aristocrat, and a former rabbi—it would be hard to find a more diverse group than these!²⁰ Yet, there is no prejudice among them—they are all one. How did this come about? How was it possible? And, can it be possible for the church today? It can if we know what they knew. They knew the church was a place for every race, culture, and color:

For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:26-28).

They knew that God “so loved the world” (John 3:16); that Christ is the “propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2); that God’s offer of salvation is wonderfully inclusive: “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me” (John 12:32); that God desires all to be saved (1 Tim. 2:3-4); and that all would come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). The word “all” includes every nation and culture—it penetrates racial barriers and crosses ethnic lines. In every language and in every dialect, the Lord’s persistent plea is heard: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden...” (Matt. 11:28).

Though modern society is plagued by racial tension and prejudice, there is no place whatever for it in the body of Christ. To think that one is better than another based on skin color, economic status, or social position is not only absurd, but sinful: “But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin...” (Jas. 2:9).

The unbiased unity of believers must characterize congregations today, for, as the Lord prayed:

Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us; that the world may believe that thou hast sent me (John 17:20-21).

Jesus' petition for His followers was and is that we be one; thus oneness is essential. Unity is not an optional "either-or," "take-it-or-leave-it" matter but is an imperative if we are to please God. Other Biblical references denote this fact:

Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the body of peace (Eph. 4:3).

Fulfill ye my joy that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind (Phil. 2:2).

We must work at unity not only to please the Lord, but also to acquire strength. A child can easily snap one piece of string, but combine twenty strings together and a grown man cannot break them! The solidarity of believers can give us the strength to overcome trials, to stand up for the faith, to spread the Gospel, to endure ridicule, and to persevere to the end.

A Busy Church

Concerning the church at Antioch, Luke said, "they ministered to the Lord, and fasted" (Acts 13:2). How did they "minister"? By their worship, by converting others, by edification, and by assisting the needy. Whatever is under consideration, they were busy in God's service. They also "fasted," which means to abstain from food (and sometimes drink). This was practiced in New Testament

times on a voluntary basis, but not as a religious ordinance. It was usually connected with mourning and/or a solemn occasion. It was not performed for public display but was a private and personal act of devotion. The point is that here was a dedicated group of saints actively engaged in God's work!

Are we workers for the Lord? Some, sadly, seem immune to work of any kind; theirs is the attitude of Mark Twain, who once said, "I do not like work even when someone else does it."²¹ However, others are usually busy at something. Many things vie for our attention: our families, jobs, education, and recreation. These are worthwhile and good, but we must not allow temporal pleasures to crowd out spiritual pursuits. Are we so busy we have no time for God? If so, we're too busy—balance is essential!

We should be willing to serve the Lord with the abilities we have. However, many do not take an active part in the work of the church because they have convinced themselves that, since they cannot lead singing, teach, or preach, their work would be of little importance. It is unfortunate that many feel they must "shake the world" before their work is of any significance. God has never created anyone with so little ability that he cannot contribute a part of himself in service in the kingdom. He may not have the ability to preach publicly, but he can preach by example. He may not have the ability to lead singing, but he can lead men to Christ by personal Bible studies, distributing tracts, etc. He can say a kind word of encouragement to the discouraged; visit the lonely, the sick, the shut-in; and comfort the bereaved. Remember, the greatest work in the church may be that which escapes the praise of men!

The story is told of a shipwreck off the coast of Rhode Island one winter day. A father and his son managed to

get into a lifeboat, but the father refused to let his son help row to shore. Upon reaching land, the father found his son frozen to death. He needed activity to keep him alive.

The same is true for God's people—we need to be active in spiritual matters to save our spiritual lives. The Lord's people are created for good works (Eph. 2:10) and are to be "always abounding in the work of the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58). Let us use our abilities, many or few, lest we lose both them and our souls by failing to do so.

A Receptive Church

And as they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away (Acts 13:2-3).

The Holy Spirit gave the Antioch congregation the command to set apart Barnabas and Saul for a specific work. The Holy Spirit is a real personality—not a ghost, not the wind, not just an influence—but a real being. He is just as real as God the Father and God the Son and is the third member of the Godhead.

How does one respond when God speaks? He listens and obeys! The Antioch congregation was receptive to the Word; they acted upon the Spirit's command without hesitation: "they sent them away." There was no questioning, no second-guessing, no bickering, no complaining, no regrets, and no delay. They had the right attitude toward God and His Word and thus were receptive to the Spirit's command.

Are we responsive toward the will of God? Our attitude toward God's Word reveals our attitude toward

God (John 12:48). If we consider the Bible to be boring, we view God in the same light. If we have no time for Scripture, we have no time for God. If the Word is a dead letter to us, then, in essence, God is dead to us. Not that Scripture is God, but we cannot mistreat God's Book without mistreating God.

Let's emulate the example of those of Antioch who received God's message and were obedient to it!

An Evangelistic Church

“So they, being sent forth by the Holy Ghost, departed unto Seleucia; and from thence they sailed to Cyprus” (Acts 13:4). The Antioch congregation was ready to send Barnabas and Saul to do mission work under the Spirit's directive. This was a sign of their maturity, as they did not cling to their friends but released them, knowing that God's Will was best. They knew that God would take up the slack with other teachers and prophets.

Barnabas and Saul were ready to be sent; though not fully certain of what the future held for them, they trusted God's new direction for their lives. They embarked upon what was the first of a number of evangelistic endeavors, with Antioch as the home base. The first missionary trip began and ended in Antioch (14:26-28). The second journey with Paul and Silas began and ended there (15:40-41; 18:22); the third missionary trip also began in Antioch (18:23). As a result of their efforts, thousands had the opportunity to hear and obey the Gospel. Churches were planted, souls were saved, and God was glorified! All of this occurred because a congregation was willing to send and missionaries were willing to be sent—both were vital!

Are we as mission-minded today as the church at Antioch was then? Our work is just as urgent as theirs in light of the world's fluctuating population, which is

currently approaching the six billion mark.²² It is roughly estimated that three babies are born per second, 95 million per year,²³ and that two people die per second, 60 million per year on this planet²⁴—most of which have never even heard of Christ and are headed to eternity in a lost condition! No, all cannot go personally, but all can go by seeing that others are sent, by sending literature, and by teaching others at home. We have the means, the technology, and the capability of getting the job done—why do we not? Could it be that our love for the lost and our Savior is lacking? Could it be that our zeal has grown cold?

It has been said that “every saint this side of heaven ought to be concerned about every sinner this side of hell” and that “the church that does not evangelize will fossilize.” We know what to do and the need of it, but have we lost sight of our mission? Are we turning inward instead of outward? If so, we would do well to acquire the evangelistic fervor of the church and missionaries at ancient Antioch!

Weaknesses Of The Church At Antioch

A Troubled Church

Alas, where there are people, there are problems, and the church at Antioch was no exception to the rule. Paul and Barnabas completed their first missionary trip, sailed back to Antioch, gave a report of their efforts, and stayed a long time (Acts 14:26-28). However, trouble began to brew:

And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved. When therefore Paul and Barnabas has no small dissension and

disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question²⁵ (15:1-2).

The peace of the church at Antioch was disrupted by certain men who had come down from Judaea and insisted that the Gentile converts must follow the rite of circumcision. They modified the plan of salvation to teach: “He that believeth and is baptized and is circumcised shall be saved.” The principle and practice of circumcision had been taught to each Jew from the cradle and was deeply planted in the minds of these false teachers. Not only were they not about to give this rite up as a religious practice, they were also striving to bind it on Gentile converts.

Paul and Barnabas knew they were hearing erroneous doctrine, and so were united with all their might in opposing these Judaizing teachers—they had “no small dissension and disputation with them.” This seems to have been a very heated argument as is evident from the descriptive words used in the text. This debate was necessary since the peace of the church was being disrupted, the Truth was being perverted, and souls were in danger of being lost if such error were believed and obeyed—the very trap into which some were falling.²⁶

To settle the controversy, Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem to question the apostles and elders about the matter. On their return from the successful conference, they came back to Antioch, “and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the epistle: which when they had read, they rejoiced for the consolation” (15:30-31). This was an occasion of rejoicing, as the Truth won over a very serious threat to the body at Antioch.

Trouble—every congregation faces it in one form or another. Sometimes doctrinal controversy arises, which

must be handled in light of Scripture. When facing those who wish to deviate from the Truth, division is unavoidable and necessary for those who want to maintain purity of doctrine. Sometimes personality clashes happen, or differences of opinion arise, or disagreements on optional matters occur—what then? Should we not be flexible, willing to bend, compromise, give in, and “prefer one another” (Rom. 12:10)? Is it worth destroying the peace of a congregation wrangling over the color of carpet, the time of worship, the order of services, and the like?

Conclusion

The church at Antioch was a marvelous congregation with many commendable features and few faults. Their example should inspire us to faithfulness and rededication to our work, to reevaluate our standing before the Lord, and to help us see more clearly the beauty of a life lived for Christ.

Endnotes

1 Modern Antioch is called “Antakya,” and is a city in Turkey, having been ceded from Syria in 1936. Though the modern city is the capital of Hatay Province, as well as a trade, processing, and manufacturing center, it is not nearly as significant today as its Biblical counterpart. 1990 population—124,443. “Antakya” in **Microsoft Encarta 98 Encyclopedia** (Microsoft, 1993-1997).

2 Simon J. Kistemaker, **Acts** (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990), p. 417.

3 Flavius Josephus, **The Wars of the Jews**, 3.2.4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979 reprint), p. 225.

4 **Eerdmans’ Handbook to the Bible**, eds. David & Pat Alexander (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1973), p. 557.

5 John McClintock & James Strong, **Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature**,

Volume 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981 reprint), p. 266.

6 F. F. Bruce, **Acts** (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1955), p. 238.

7 Josephus, **The Wars of the Jews**, 7.3.3, p. 479.

8 Kistemaker, p. 417. For example, Nicolas converted to Judaism in Antioch. He came to Jerusalem, where he became a Christian and one of the seven selected to assist neglected widows (Acts 6:5). Some are of the opinion that Luke himself was a native of Antioch and was eventually converted to Christ in the city. If this were the case, he would have had great interest in Antioch and enthusiasm for the Gentile mission of Christianity. Bruce, p. 243.

9 Lloyd John Ogilvie, **Drumbeat of Love** (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1976), pp. 152-153.

10 James Burton Coffman, **Acts** (Austin, Tx: Firm Foundation Publishing House, 1976), p. 228.

11 Quoted from Jonathan Edwards, **On Knowing Christ** (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1993), 24-25.

12 There are those of the persuasion that "Christian" was coined by antagonists to the faith to defame the followers of Christ. Kistemaker, **Acts**, p. 423. However, such may be an unwarranted conclusion, especially in light of Isaiah's prophecy.

13 Agabus' prophecy did come to pass in the reign of Claudius; his reign was "marked by a succession of bad harvests and serious famines in various parts of the empire." Bruce, p. 243.

14 In fact, the Jews so disdained all others that they believed that "God had created the gentiles to be fuel for the fires of hell." William Barclay, **The Gospel of Luke** (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975 reprint), p. 48.

15 Michael LeBoeuf, **How to Win Customers and Keep Them for Life** (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1987), p. 35.

16 A. T. Robertson, **Word Pictures in the New Testament**, Volume 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1931), p. 248.

17 Everett F. Harrison, **Interpreting Acts: The Expanding Church** (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), p. 214.

Some assert that this Simeon was the same person as Simon of Cyrene, who carried Jesus' cross, though there is no substantial proof for that claim. Kistemaker, **Acts**, p. 454.

18 He is not to be confused with Luke the physician.

19 The Greek word translated "brought up" can mean "foster brother." Manaen and Herod Antipas may not only have been playmates as boys, but members of the same family. Harrison, p. 215.

20 It has been pointed out by many that this list of prophets is symbolic of the universal appeal of the gospel.

21 As quoted by Archibald D. Hart in **The Crazy-Making Workplace** (Ann Arbor: Servant Publications, 1993), p. 15.

22 It is estimated that on October 12 of this year, a child's birth will push the world's population to six billion. David Briscoe, "World Awaits Birth of 6 Billionth Living Earthling," **Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal** (27 May 1999), p. 3A.

23 Paul Lee Tan, **Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations** (Rockville, MD: Assurance Publishers, 1979), p. 200.

24 Tan, p. 303.

25 "The brethren at Antioch did not properly estimate the value of the words of an inspired apostle, or they would have accepted without question Paul's decision in the matter without the necessity of a trip to Jerusalem. It is probable that these false teachers had created doubts in the minds of the brethren regarding Paul's commission as an apostle, by urging that he was not one of the Twelve and, therefore, not qualified to speak as an apostle." **Annual Lesson Commentary** (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1994), p. 31.

26 Galatians chapter two records the events surrounding a trip by Peter to Antioch. Whether his visit occurred before or after the Jerusalem conference in Acts 15 is a matter of question. In any event, Peter was guilty of hypocrisy and prejudice against the Gentiles, as was Barnabas also, "and the other Jews dissembled likewise with him" (Gal. 2:13). The "other Jews" were all the other Jewish Christians who were present. Kistemaker, **Galatians**, p. 95. Had Paul not intervened and rebuked Peter, the ensuing split could have destroyed the church at Antioch.

CHAPTER 6

Lessons From The Churches of Galatia

Darrell Beard

Introduction

I*T IS AN HONOR* to be a part of the **POWER** Lectureship. I have long had an appreciation and respect for the Southaven congregation, her elders, and preachers. The theme, **The Lord's Church: Past, Present, Future**, is one of great importance, and our section on "Lessons From New Testament Churches" ought to be one of great interest and practical benefit. My assignment is to discuss lessons we can learn and apply from a study of the churches of Galatia.

We have long known that wise men profit from a study of history. They learn not to repeat the mistakes of the past, but to build upon its accomplishments. This is especially true of **Bible** history. Not only have human beings not changed fundamentally since the first century, but eternal, spiritual principles are also involved. What God commanded, commended, and condemned in the congregations of Galatia are the things He commands, commends, and condemns in us today.

Background Of "Churches Of Galatia"

Our study of the "churches of Galatia" is made somewhat more difficult by the uncertainty over the identification of those congregations. To what area did

“Galatia” refer when used in the New Testament? What were the cities in “Galatia” in which the churches were located? What was the region called “Galatia” by Luke in Acts 16:6 and 18:23? Who constituted the “churches of Galatia” in 1 Corinthians 16:1 and Galatians 1:2?

A little historical background may be necessary in order to introduce the controversy over the identity of the churches of Galatia. In 278 B.C., the Gauls crossed into Asia from Europe and overran parts of Asia Minor. They established and maintained a kingdom for many years in a rather small area in north central Asia Minor. Their three main urban centers were Pessinus, Ancyra (modern Ankara, Turkey), and Tavium. They were defeated by the Romans in 189 B.C. but were allowed to continue as an independent kingdom until King Amyntas bequeathed the kingdom to Augustus and the Roman Empire in 25 B.C.

Rome took the original territory which comprised the kingdom of Galatia and added other parts to it which had been controlled by Amyntas. These areas at times included Paphlagonia, Pontus, Phrygia, Pisidia, Lycaonia, and Isauria. In Paul’s day, the additional districts included Lycaonia, Isauria, and a portion of Pisidia, all lying to the southwest and south of Galatia proper. Thus a new, larger territory was created as a province in the Roman Empire. It was called “Galatia” and was not limited to the geography of the former kingdom of the Gauls. The primary cities in this southern region of the new province of Galatia were Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Derbe, and Lystra. It was “politically correct” to speak of these as cities of Galatia, although the old terms were still used to define a local situation or place. For example, in Acts 13:14, it is “Antioch of Pisidia,” to distinguish it from the Antioch in Syria, and in 14:6, it is “Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia,” and in 14:11, the people of Lystra lifted up their voice and spoke in “the speech of Lycaonia.”

There is no record of congregations being established in the northern Galatian cities of Pessinus, Ancyra, and Tavium. Of course, it is possible that congregations were established in these cities at some later time, but it does not seem that it could have been early enough to be relevant to the early problem of Judaizing teachers. Paul's habit was to concentrate on heavily populated areas where people were already Hellenized and where there were synagogues. These situations existed in south Galatia, but not in the north. We do have record of strong congregations being established in the southern region of the province of Galatia. It seems reasonable to identify "the churches of Galatia" with the congregations that were established on the first missionary journey at Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Derbe, and Lystra.

To identify the "Galatia" of Paul's day with the enlarged area which had been converted into a new province some 75 years before is consistent with the current Roman political designation. This could agree with Luke's description in Acts of "the region of Galatia" (Acts 16:6) or "the country of Galatia" (18:23). Paul, a Roman citizen, was in the habit of using the current provincial names to locate an area or to identify people or congregations in that area. In 1 Corinthians 16, he speaks of "the churches of Galatia" (v. 1), "the churches of Asia" (v. 19), and implies churches of Macedonia (v. 5) and Achaia (v. 15). In 2 Corinthians 8:1, he does mention "the churches of Macedonia."

Considering the historical setting and the nature of the false teaching embraced by the Galatians, the idea that we are studying about churches in the southern region of Galatia early in the development of the Judaizing error strongly recommends itself to us. The following considerations also tend to point to the book of Galatians as having been sent to the churches of Antioch of Pisidia,

Iconium, Derbe, and Lystra not long after they were established on the first missionary journey:

First, the epistle of Galatians discusses a people who had more contact and familiarity with Judaism than would likely be the case of the cities in the northern region of Galatia. Second, Barnabas was known to these Galatians. This would be true of the churches established on the first missionary journey, but highly unlikely of the northern Galatian cities before mentioned.

Third, Paul said that he had instructed “the churches of Galatia” as he commanded the church in Corinth to lay by in store upon the first day of the week to assist the Judean brethren (1 Cor. 16:1-3). In Acts 20:4, the names of those who accompanied Paul to Jerusalem are listed. These included a brother from Derbe and Timothy from Lystra. Does this not indicate that these were included in “the churches of Galatia” discussed in 1 Corinthians 16:1?

Finally, in Galatians 2:1-10, Paul describes a visit to Jerusalem in which the problems of false teachers and binding circumcision were faced. This surely refers to the meeting described in Acts 15 of what some have called the “Jerusalem Conference,” and implies an early date for a letter to churches in the southern part of the province of Galatia.

Establishment Of The Churches Of Galatia

On the first missionary journey, Paul and Silas came to the city of Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:14). The rulers of the synagogue extended to them an opportunity to speak “any word of exhortation,” and Paul stood up to address “men of Israel” (Jews) and “ye that fear God” (proselytes or other God-fearing Gentiles). Near the end of his sermon, Paul emphasizes this fundamental fact about Christ:

Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren,
that through this man is preached unto you the

forgiveness of sins: and by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses (13:38-39).

This is precisely the theme of the epistle to the Galatians:

Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified (Gal. 2:16).

The Gentiles heard this message gladly, and invited Paul and Barnabas to return the following Sabbath. At the appointed time the next week, the unbelieving Jews spoke against the things that were taught by Paul, making it impossible for him to speak again in the synagogue. He and Barnabas boldly spoke to the Jews: "It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46). The Gentiles were glad and glorified God. Even though Paul and Barnabas were expelled from Antioch, they left the (mostly Gentile) disciples "filled with joy, and with the Holy Ghost" (13:52).

They moved on to Iconium and "so spake" the Word that a great number of Jews and Greeks believed (14:1). In spite of persecution, they stayed in Iconium a long time, speaking boldly in the Lord. It was necessary to flee from there into Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia. There they preached the Gospel. Jews from Antioch and Iconium stirred up the people and stoned Paul, leaving him for dead. However, he rose up and went back into Lystra. The next day he went into Derbe and then returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch. As he did so, he was "confirming

the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God” (14:22). They ordained elders in every church and commended them to the Lord (14:23).

Paul highly commended the Galatians for their kind and sympathetic treatment of him during their work together:

Ye know how through infirmity of the flesh I preached the gospel unto you at the first. And my temptation which was in my flesh ye despised not, nor rejected; but received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus. Where is then the blessedness ye spake of? for I bear you record, that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me (Gal. 4:13-15).

Thus, when Paul left this southern region of the Roman province of Galatia, he had preached to Jews and Gentiles alike, and “a great number” of both believed. Miracles had been performed to confirm the message being taught. Sufficient time had been spent with the brethren to ground them in the faith. Elders were appointed in all the congregations. Their numbers increased. Paul probably felt that the work among the churches of Galatia was on solid ground and that he could expect continued growth and faithfulness.

Circumstances Calling For An Epistle To The Galatians

When Paul and Barnabas returned from the first missionary journey, they stayed with the brethren in Antioch of Syria a “long time” (Acts 14:28). Then, certain men came from Judea and taught the brethren, “Except

ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved” (15:1). Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them at Syrian Antioch (15:2). In Galatians 2:4-5, Paul wrote that, when false brethren came in, he did not give place to them even for an hour in order that “the truth of the gospel might continue” in them.

The brethren in Antioch of Syria decided to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders about this question. When they arrived in Jerusalem, “there arose certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses” (Acts 15:5). After hearing from Peter, Barnabas, and Paul, it was decided to send a letter about the matter to surrounding congregations. Part of the letter read:

Forasmuch as we have heard that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment: it seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have sent therefore Judas and Silas, who shall also tell you the same things by mouth (15:24-27).

At some point, Paul heard the shocking and disturbing news that the churches of Galatia were being greatly moved by this same false doctrine. When the letter was written and sent to the churches of Galatia is not a revealed matter, and Bible students disagree about it. It may be that, knowing of the situation in Galatia, and having the letter to Gentile churches in hand, Paul decided to write them and to follow that up with the return visit

of Acts 16:1-6, at which time he also delivered the letter to them from Jerusalem. My speculation is that the letter was written shortly after the “Jerusalem conference” of Acts 15 and shortly before the beginning of the second missionary journey. There is, of course, no way to know for sure, but this seems to be a reasonable conclusion.

The Galatian Problem

The problem was powerfully stated by Paul in the very first chapter of the book:

I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed (Gal. 1:6-9).

The tragic consequences of their actions were fourfold: (1) They were removing themselves from God. (2) They were removing themselves from the grace, or favor, that they had had in Christ. (3) They had perverted the Gospel. (4) By having a part in such, they were accursed of God.

Further insight into the nature of this error is given in the epistle. The Galatians desired to be under the Law of Moses (3:2), sought to be justified by it (3:11), and were trying to follow the works of the Law (3:2). They were observing holy days and other religious seasons as in Judaism, and Paul feared that he had wasted his time with them (4:10-11). Circumcision was taught by the false brethren and was being accepted by the churches of Galatia (5:2-4,12; 6:12-13).

How Paul Dealt With The Error Of The Judaizers In Galatia

Learning how Paul dealt with these false teachers should be wonderfully instructive to Christians who face 20th and 21st century errors. First, he strongly affirmed independent, apostolic authority for his teaching. The Gospel he taught was not after man. He did not receive it from man, but it came by miraculous revelation from the Lord (Gal. 1:11-12). After he became a Christian and received a commission to preach to the Gentiles, he did not seek other brethren out for the message he was to preach nor did he seek the approval of man for his preaching. They did, however, agree with his mission and work and gave to him the right hand of fellowship (1:15-19; 2:7-9).

It is not surprising that false teachers will try to undermine authority. Today's false teachers question whether the New Testament is "pattern authority" or whether we are to be governed by "law." They denigrate "proof-text preaching"—the citing of book, chapter, and verse to uphold the things taught. In its place, they count on caring, love, and an agreeable spirit. Actually, it is not a choice between scriptural exactness or a loving spirit. Both must be present for faithful brethren.

Second, the apostle showed that all the benefits and blessings of being in Christ were being enjoyed by them before they knew anything about these false Judaizing teachers. Several examples could be given.

1. ***As a result of the Gospel that Paul preached, they were already "churches of Galatia" (1:2).*** They lacked nothing in being congregations such as the Lord would have them to be. They were fully organized, each with its own elders. When Paul left them, they were growing in numbers and were supplied with all that they needed to continue in the faith.

2. ***They had God as their Father, and Jesus Christ as their Lord*** (1:3). They lacked nothing to make that relationship a reality. The Judaizers could not help them to become children of God or to be better children of God. In fact, their error destroyed that relationship.

3. ***They had been delivered from this present evil world by the will of God through Christ*** (1:4). They did not have to be circumcised or observe the deeds of the Law of Moses. The Gospel alone was the power of God to their salvation (Rom. 1:16).

4. ***They had already been called by God into the grace of Christ*** (Gal. 1:6). By being taught the Gospel in its purity and simplicity, they understood the subject of grace. False teachers accuse faithful brethren of not understanding grace, but the fact is that only Gospel preaching and Christian living will allow one to enjoy the grace of Christ. 1 Peter 5:12 says, "I have written briefly, exhorting, and testifying that this is the true grace of God wherein ye stand."

5. ***The Gospel that they had received before the Judaizers came along was that which had been Divinely given by the revelation of the Lord*** (1:11-12). They had received the Gospel of Christ but were now perverting it (1:6-9). They already had the Truth of the Gospel when the Judaizers with their "new and improved gospel" appeared (2:4). They needed to obey Gospel Truth and continue in it (2:5; 3:1). What "latter-day" revelations do those who want to change things offer today? What truths have faithful brethren not been teaching and trying to practice before they came along?

6. ***They had been justified by the faith of Christ*** (2:16).

7. ***They had received the Spirit by the hearing of faith*** (3:2), ***not in a direct manner separate from the Word of God.***

8. ***They were children of Abraham (3:7), children of God (3:26-27), having received the adoption of sons (4:5), and were made heirs of God (4:7).***

9. ***They were one in Christ (3:28).***

10. ***They enjoyed liberty and freedom (5:1).***

11. ***They walked and were led by the Spirit (5:16,18,25).***

12. ***They already constituted the household of faith (6:10) and the Israel of God (6:16).*** The point was powerfully made that false teachers offer nothing more that is needed for salvation and living an acceptable life with God. Let people beware when they are enticed to accept something new in religion.

We have seen two ways in which Paul dealt with false teachers. He affirmed the truthfulness and authority of the things he taught, and he showed that the false teachers could offer nothing of value to what faithful brethren were already enjoying as a result of obeying and continuing in “the truth of the gospel.”

A number of other things can be briefly observed about Paul’s dealings with false teachers in the Galatian epistle. He expressed shock and surprise at their departure from the Gospel (1:6). What would happen if we vocalized more strongly our dismay and amazement at unscriptural goings-on in congregations where our relatives, friends, or acquaintances attend?

He challenged them with thought-provoking questions, such as: “Who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth?” (3:1). “Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?” (3:2). “How turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage?” (4:9). “Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?” (4:16). “Who did hinder you, that ye should not obey the truth?” (5:7).

He did not give in or compromise with these false teachers for a moment (2:5). He uncovered and exposed their tactics and motives (4:17; 6:12-13). He used illustrations to drive home his point (4:1). He made tender, brotherly appeals (3:15). He quoted Scripture (3:16). He showed the proper place and use of that which they had misapplied and misused (3:19-25). He commended good things about them (4:12-15). He expressed doubt and concern for their soundness (4:20). He exhorted (5:1). He showed the consequences of their error (5:4). Yet, he expressed confidence in their eventual and ultimate better judgment (5:10).

Lessons For Today

From a study of the churches of Galatia, we can learn a number of timely and practical lessons. For example, false teachers and their doctrine can influence a congregation or individuals whom you would not have thought would fall from the faith. Bible writers mentioned that this had happened in the past, could happen in their day, and could happen at any time:

But there arose false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of (2 Pet. 2:1-2).

To be blind to false teachers among us is folly, indeed.

A second principle to be learned from the Galatian congregations is that error will not go away of its own accord or die of old age. It must be stoutly opposed by

loving, faithful brethren. Even when brethren have the best and purest of motives and try to use tactfulness, kindness, and patience, it can get messy. People's feelings can get hurt. Those standing for the Truth can be accused of being harsh, unloving, and judgmental. Some may leave. Friends may be alienated. Brethren not only have the right, but the duty to identify false teachers, specify the error they are teaching, and refute it with sound, scriptural arguments.

There were, no doubt, good and faithful brethren in the churches of Galatia, even when the Judaizing teachers were enjoying their greatest success. What were they doing? Were they speaking out, resisting unauthorized changes introduced among them? The churches of Galatia had qualified elders who were appointed by inspired men (Acts 14:23). Were they leading the fight with error, or were they intimidated into silence? Were they compromising for the sake of "peace" and fear that they would lose some numbers?

There is a crying need in our brotherhood today for strong, capable, courageous elders. They could stop a lot of the foolishness going on in our brotherhood today, if they would take to heart these words directed to elders:

Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers. For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision: whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake. One of themselves, even a prophet of their own, said, The Cretians are alway liars, evil beasts, slow bellies. This witness is true. Wherefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith (Tit. 1:9-13).

False teachers have often been skilled at combining some of the expressions and teachings with which faithful brethren have been familiar through the years with alien concepts they have borrowed from other religious or philosophical teachers. This makes the changes and innovations which they introduce seem harmless. In fact, they make them seem fresh and exciting new ways to rescue the church from what they view as its current staleness, stagnation, and irrelevancy. They hold this out as the way to make the church more interesting and appealing to today's population.

Three things motivated Paul in his confrontation with error: his love for God, his love for the Truth, and his love for souls. Even though strong and stern language was at times called for, Paul had a tender heart. He was full of compassion, and concerned for the welfare of beloved brethren. He realized that he could not act out of the motive of pleasing men, but of pleasing God (Gal. 1:10). He tenderly addressed them as "brethren" (3:15) and "my little children" (4:19). He pleaded with them and encouraged them (4:12). He would have liked to be able to be with them personally and change the tone of his voice (4:20). He promoted love among brethren, rather than their biting and devouring one another or provoking and envying one another (5:13,15,26).

Paul was strong, uncompromising, and unbending in his resistance to error and false teachers. Unity and fellowship among brethren must be on the terms of a common devotion to the truth of God's Word. Things that are unauthorized cannot be practiced by some and ignored by others as though they make no difference. Things that are bound upon believers must be practiced by all believers, as authorized. Those who refuse to practice that which is commanded cannot be regarded as faithful brethren who are just different.

Conclusion

There are some things about the churches of Galatia which we do not know. However, we can know enough of their failings and errors to avoid making the same mistakes, in principle, which they made. We know enough of the favorable and positive qualities they possessed to put things into practice which will be to our advantage. Will we learn from the “churches of Galatia”?

CHAPTER 7

Lessons From The Church At Thessalonica

Billy Bland

Introduction

BACKGROUND MATERIAL FOR THE church in Thessalonica is found in Acts 17 and First and Second Thessalonians. We are blessed to have such material for this particular congregation. Not all churches recorded in the Bible have such inspired background or foundational material. For example, the books of Romans and Hebrews do not have such historical materials for us to glean background information. Although these books are genuine and rich in material, one cannot read of the establishment of these churches. Internal evidence in such books may provide many implications, such as the author, occasion, and purpose of writing, but one cannot go to the Book of Acts and find the circumstances regarding the establishing of the church, etc.

Fortunately, however, concerning the church in Thessalonica, one can open his Bible to the Book of Acts and read where Paul travels into the city of Thessalonica with Silas, preaches the Gospel, and establishes the Cause of Christ in that city.

Paul's love for the Lord and the lost motivated him to carry God's Gospel throughout much of Asia Minor. Regarding Paul's journey and what he would face in Thessalonica, brother Robert R. Taylor, Jr. has observed:

Amidst his Macedonian travels while prosecuting his second missionary journey Paul came to Thessalonica. Prior to his arrival in the Thessalonian metropolis he had succeeded in establishing the Lord's church in Philippi, one hundred miles from Thessalonica and which lay to the northeast. The church had begun in Philippi within the fiery framework of persistent persecutions from the aroused opposition. Paul would face more of the same in his determined efforts to evangelize Thessalonica, the city which he chose as his next base of earnest evangelization.¹

The City

The city of Thessalonica has a rich, and sometimes tempestuous, history. It was an old city by the time the apostle Paul visited it. Its ancient name was "Therme," deriving its name from the hot springs that were in the area. In 315 B.C. Cassander, who was the brother-in-law of Alexander the Great and the son-in-law of Philip of Macedon, had rebuilt the city and named it after his wife, "Thessalonica."

Macedonia, at one time, had been divided into four regions or districts, and Thessalonica served as the capital of one of these districts. Later, these districts were brought together as one and Thessalonica served as the capital of the entire Macedonian province.²

Noting the location and the history of Thessalonica, Albert Barnes wrote:

Thessalonica was a city and seaport of Macedonia. It was at the head of the bay Thermaicus, or the gulf of Thessalonica...and was, therefore favourably situated for commerce. It was on the great Aegean Way; was possessed

of an excellent harbour, and had great advantages for commerce through the Hellespont, and with Asia Minor and the adjacent countries. Macedonia was an independent country until it was subdued by the Romans.³

During the civil war in Rome in 49 and 48 B.C., Thessalonica happened to choose the winning side and as a consequence was made a “free city.” As a “free city” it could make many of its own decisions and rulings without governmental interference: “The city was inhabited by Greeks, Romans, and Jews.”⁴

Just to the south of the city was found the famed “Mount Olympus.” This snow-capped mountain was considered to be the home of many of the so-called Grecian gods and goddesses. This no doubt had much influence on the idolatry of the area. Paul records how that some of the people had “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9). Mr. Barnes notes that the city “adored many gods, but particularly Jupiter, as the father of Hercules, the alleged founder of its ancient royal family.”⁵

Today the city is known as “Salonica” or “Saloniki.” Many Jews are still to be found within the city. The population of the city in our era has varied from 275,000 to 350,000.⁶

The Establishment Of The Church

The church at Thessalonica was established on Paul’s second missionary journey. The Gospel, although met with opposition, had been received in the city of Philippi. A wonderful lady by the name of Lydia and a jailor were among those that had been converted in Philippi. Being a Roman citizen, Paul had been unlawfully imprisoned in

Philippi and, after the magistrates learned they had unlawfully imprisoned one of the Roman citizens, they freed Paul and besought him to leave their city. This great apostle is not deterred in his mission. He continues to do God's bidding and his journey will take him and Silas on to Thessalonica. The Divine Record gives us the following account of the church's beginning in this city:

Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews: And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures. Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ. And some of them believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few (Acts 17:1-4).

After traveling the one hundred miles from Philippi to Thessalonica, Paul enters into the synagogue of the Jews. The text states that this was Paul's custom. Here, Paul knew that he would have an audience of the Jews as well as some of the Gentiles who had been converted to the Jewish religion. Paul would visit this synagogue for three weeks, each time on the sabbath. There were good reasons for Paul to choose the Jewish synagogues to spread the Gospel of Christ. (1) He could identify with the Jewish mindset, himself being a Jew. (2) He once stood where they stood. (3) His purpose was to preach to the Jew first and then to the Greek (cf. Rom. 1:16). (4) The synagogues would effectively serve as a base for the spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.⁷

Once given opportunity to speak, Paul “reasoned with them out of the scriptures.” The Jews would have known the Old Testament Scriptures. Hence, regarding Bible authority, Paul starts on common ground with them. From these scriptures Paul would open and allege “that Christ must needs have suffered and risen from the dead, and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ.” The words “reason,” “opening,” and “alleging” all indicate the use of argumentation as Paul’s manner of preaching. His preaching was not based on subjective feelings, but on objective reasoning. One could check the Scriptures to see if what Paul was preaching was in fact the truth. His method of preaching was vastly different from much of the so-called preaching of today. His was based upon a “thus saith the Lord.” He would prove that this Jesus is the Christ.

The Gospel meets with much success in Thessalonica. Among those converted were some of the Jews, a great multitude of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the chief women. However, there were some unbelievers as well. These unbelievers were Jews and were motivated by envy to persecute Paul, Silas, and any who would align themselves with them. It must have been a great disappointment to these unbelievers to lose so many of the Jewish converts (and especially some of the chief women) to the Truth!

But the Jews which believed not, moved with envy, took unto them certain lewd fellows of the baser sort, and gathered a company, and set all the city on an uproar, and assaulted the house of Jason, and sought to bring them out to the people. And when they found them not, they drew Jason and certain brethren unto the rulers of the city, crying, These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also; Whom

Jason hath received: and these all do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus. And they troubled the people and the rulers of the city, when they heard these things. And when they had taken security of Jason, and of the other, they let them go. And the brethren immediately sent away Paul and Silas by night unto Berea: who coming thither went into the synagogue of the Jews (Acts 17:5-10).

These Jews had no scruples relative to their ungodly mode of operation in opposing the Truth. Cook observes:

Nowhere was the hatred of the Jews more savage and malevolent. They hired some of the lowest and most unprincipled of the mob who hung about the streets and markets, and succeeded in raising a furious commotion against St. Paul (sic) and his companions. The rioters stormed the house where they lodged. Not finding the missionaries, asseverating that the preachers of Christ were political conspirators plotting against the Emperor and the law, these Jews utterly failed in the immediate object which they had in view. But the position of St. Paul (sic) was felt by the Thessalonian Christians to be one of extreme peril, and he and Silas left Thessalonica the following night. The apostles proceeded to Berea. Immediately when the unbelieving Jews of Thessalonica heard of this, they flung themselves upon his tract, and constrained him to take his departure. He embarked for Athens.⁸

First And Second Thessalonians

In addition to the written record of the establishment of the church in the city of Thessalonica, we are blessed with two epistles written to this congregation. Although it is not the intent here to give a detailed introduction to

these epistles, we do want to note a few things regarding them. To obtain a detailed introduction to these books, one may consult any major commentary.

Paul is the human author of both of these epistles. There is much internal and external support of his authorship. These epistles evidently are the first books penned by the apostles that have been preserved in Holy Writ and in fact are believed to be the first books of the New Testament. They were written around the dates of A.D. 52 and 53, respectively. The place of writing was the city of Corinth.

Paul had a purpose for writing these two letters. His visit to the city had been cut short due to the persecution against him and the church. He was much concerned about their spiritual welfare. He, therefore, in his first epistle, writes to encourage them in their steadfastness. He expresses his thankfulness that they had remained faithful in the face of opposition. He wants to encourage them to remain steadfast. He also answers some questions about those who had died in the Lord. Were they at any disadvantage when Christ comes again? Was there any hope for those that had died? In chapter 4, Paul explains that those who were asleep in the Lord had not lost their hope. In fact, the dead in Christ would be raised first, then those living would meet the Lord in the air and would forever be with the Lord. They were to comfort one another with these words.

In his second epistle, he expresses his gratitude for their continued growth and faithfulness. Again he encourages them in the face of the persecution that they are facing. He also writes to clear up the misunderstanding they had relative to Christ's second coming. They had gotten the false idea that the coming of Christ was imminent. Paul says that before Christ would come there would be an apostasy or falling away. They were to continue

in their work (physical labor) and not be idle. They were to practice corrective discipline upon those that walked disorderly.

Strengths Of The Church

One must remember that the church of our Lord is composed of two sides. There is the Divine side, which is perfect. It has the perfect Head, the perfect Savior, the perfect pattern, the perfect destiny, etc. There is also the human side of the church, which is imperfect. It has all the imperfections that characterize humanity. It is to this side of the church that address is now made. As long as the church follows the Divine directive in practice and in doctrine, it will be strong. When the church departs from its Divine course, to that degree it will be weak. What were some of the strengths of the church of the Thessalonians?

The Church Accepted Evidence

When Paul came into Thessalonica, he “reasoned” with the people from the Word of God. The word “reasoned” carries the idea “to convince by use of argumentation.” To the good credit of those that were converted, they accepted the evidence presented by Paul. Much of “Christendom” is based merely upon subjective feelings. But the Word of God appeals to the intellect as well as to the emotion. In giving the great commission Jesus says that all nations are to be taught (Matt. 28:18-20). People could put Paul’s (and others’) teaching to test: “These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so” (Acts 17:11). Christians are admonished, “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good” (1 Thess. 5:21). We must always be willing to accept evidence from the Divine book, the Bible. There is no hope

for a person who will not change when confronted by genuine evidence from God's Word. Only the Truth will make one free (John 8:32).

They Successfully Faced Persecution

From the inception of the Gospel, the church in Thessalonica faced persecution. The envious, unbelieving Jews hired base, or lowlife, people to bring false accusations against the preachers and the recent converts to Christianity. Jesus warned that His disciples would face persecution. This is not to deter one in his Christian life. Contrariwise, one is to face this persecution with a sense of joy. Jesus taught:

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you (Matt. 5:10-12).

These saints successfully faced the opposition that came their way. Paul wrote to them:

And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost: So that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia (1 Thess. 1:6-7).

They Were Evangelistic

In spite of the opposition to the Truth by its enemies, the church was evangelistic. Paul wrote: "For from you sounded out the word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward

is spread abroad; so that we need not to speak any thing” (1 Thess. 1:8). God intends for the church to sound out the Word of the Lord throughout this great world. What wonderful opportunities exist for us to sound out God’s Word today. Formerly communistic countries, which had forbidden open proclamation of the Gospel, now allow God’s Word to be proclaimed. It is encouraging to see how that some churches and individuals have responded to the Macedonian call. However, there are many other places that still need to hear the Gospel of Christ:

And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen (Matt. 28:18-20).

If the church is going to respect the authority of Christ, it must carry God’s Gospel into all the world. The church of Christ must be busy doing the work of Christ. They are nearly six billion precious souls in the world today. Opportunities abound for us to carry the Gospel. We need men who will dedicate themselves to carrying the Gospel, and we need congregations that are willing to financially support and stand behind those men and women who go into all the world.

They Were A Genuinely Converted Church

In order to be Christians the Thessalonians had to give up certain practices. In essence, they had to be genuinely converted to Christ. They gave up their false religious practices in order to worship the one true God: “For they

themselves show of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thess. 1:9).

Notice that the Thessalonians had "turned to God from idols." Becoming a Christian requires a **turning**. Conversion is a turning to God from whatever was keeping us from God. Baptism does not sanctify an unholy lifestyle. Godly sorrow must precede our repentance (2 Cor. 7:10). This means that we must cease whatever sin we are doing. Congregations that do not teach repentance for sin may swell in number, but they are not converting people to the Christ. The Thessalonians did not continue in their idolatry once they came to Christ. Neither may we continue in sin that grace may abound (cf. Rom. 6:1-2).

Jesus taught that His disciples must be converted:

And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:2-3).

Likewise, the Jews were told, "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19).

They Were A Church That Had A Growing Faith And An Abounding Love For One Another

In Paul's second epistle, he commends the Thessalonian brethren for their growing faith and love for each other: "We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is meet, because that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth" (2 Thess. 1:3). Their love toward one another must have been a constant encouragement to

each one as he or she faced persecution from the unbelieving Jews. What a blessing it is when a church is at peace and its faith is growing. Jesus taught love as an identifying mark of His disciples:

A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another (John 13:34-35).

A congregation that does not grow in faith and in love toward one another is going to become stagnant and eventually fall away. One of the saddest things to behold is a congregation that is about to divide over ungodly attitudes. Sad is the occasion when a visitor to one of our services can sense the tension that exists as a thick cloud hovering over the congregation. But what a joy it is to have visitors come and see what genuine love each Christian has for the other. Such will make this visitor want to return to our services and hopefully be converted to Christ eventually. Certainly, one of the strengths of the church at Thessalonica was its growing faith and the love that abounded toward one another.

They Believed In Christ's Second Coming

Much is written in the two epistles relative to Christ's second coming. Although they had misconceptions regarding Christ's coming (a point that will be noted under the weaknesses of the church), they did believe that He was truly coming again. How does the belief that Christ is coming again serve as a strength of the church? Namely, if we know that Christ is coming again (and He is!), then we should fashion our lives accordingly. Where do you want to be found when Christ comes? Do you want to be found

in one of the casinos (perhaps better spelled “caSINo”), when Christ comes? Do you want to be found at a bar drinking the devil’s brew when Christ comes? Do you want to be engaging in some immoral act or uttering the name of Jehovah in vain when Christ comes again? Surely, none want to be so found of Christ at His second coming. John wrote:

And now, little children, abide in him; that, when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming (1 John 2:28).

Likewise, Peter informs us what our attitude and lifestyle ought to be in view of Christ’s coming. He wrote:

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness (2 Pet. 3:10-13).

Weaknesses Of The Church

Fortunately, the strengths of the church in Thessalonica far exceeded their weaknesses. However, any weakness within the church is not to be ignored. While the church in Thessalonica had all of the above-mentioned strengths and more, there were some weaknesses that needed their immediate attention. What were some of these weaknesses?

***They Had A Misconception Relative
To Christ's Second Coming***

Paul, in his first epistle, had written some things regarding Christ's coming (1 Thess. 4:13-5:3). In his second epistle, he corrects their misunderstandings about the timing of Christ's coming. They believed that Christ's coming was imminent, or soon to happen. Paul tells them that before Christ comes that there is going to be a falling away. There would obviously be a time element involved before Christ would come again. It is a fact that the Word of God did not teach that, in the first century, Christ's coming was imminent (even Peter knew that he would get old and die for the Cause of Christ—cf. 2 Pet. 1:13-14 and John 21:18-19). While Paul and others taught that Christ's coming was like a thief in the night (unannounced as to the time of his coming), they did not teach that it was imminent in the first century. Paul wrote:

Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him, that ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand. Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God. Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things? (2 Thess. 2:1-5).

Today, we must firmly believe that Christ is coming again. And, one day His coming will be imminent, but no one knows when that day is. Consequently, we must not

become date setters, thinking that we can predict when Christ is coming. However, not knowing when Christ is coming, we must live our lives so as to be accepted of Him when he does appear.

Some Had Ceased To Work

For some reason there were those in the church at Thessalonica who had ceased to perform physical work. Paul wrote:

For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies. Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread (2 Thess. 3:11-12).

Paul had taught both by example as well as by precept that they should work:

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us. For yourselves know how ye ought to follow us: for we behaved not ourselves disorderly among you; Neither did we eat any man's bread for nought; but wrought with labour and travail night and day, that we might not be chargeable to any of you: Not because we have not power, but to make ourselves an ensample unto you to follow us. For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat (3:6-10).

The Word of God has ever taught the dignity of work. God does not intend for a Christian to be a parasite upon

the church nor upon society. In fact, one reason for working is to be able to help those that are in genuine need. To the Ephesian brethren, Paul wrote: "Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth" (Eph 4:28). Such who had stopped working were said to be walking disorderly and, if they did not correct such, were to be withdrawn.

Some Had Become Busybodies

These brethren, who had ceased to work, had become busybodies. They were not working and minding their own business, but had become busy in other men's matters. One of the dangers of idleness is that it helps to contribute to one's becoming a busybody, a meddler in other people's affairs. Paul informed Timothy of this danger if the church constantly supported the young widows: "And withal they learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house; and not only idle, but tattlers also and busybodies, speaking things which they ought not" (1 Tim. 5:13).

After giving this warning, Paul then gives instruction as to what the younger women should do: "I will therefore that the younger women marry, bear children, guide the house, give none occasion to the adversary to speak reproachfully" (5:14). These passages do not teach that a young woman or widow cannot not be helped by the church when there is a need, but that they are not to be supported constantly by the church, lest they should become idle tattlers and busybodies. This certainly would contribute to the weakness of the church. Sad it is that elders and preachers have to spend untold hours trying to put out the "fires" that were started by some busybody in the congregation. If people persist in such, Paul says they are among the ones that are to be withdrawn from by the church.

Conclusion

Overall the church at Thessalonica was a great church. It had been established amid great persecution. Yet, it remained steadfast in the face of such opposition. Although she had her weak points, her strength was great. Paul loved these brethren and was concerned about their spiritual development. Fortunate, indeed, is the fact that we have the record of the establishment of the church in Thessalonica as well as two terse but powerful epistles written to them. May we learn both from their strengths and their weaknesses and be the church that God would have us to be: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen” (2 Thess. 3:18).

Endnotes

1 Robert R. Taylor, Jr., **Studies In First and Second Thessalonians** (Shreveport, LA: Lambert Book House, 1977), p. 21.

2 Ibid.

3 Albert Barnes, **Barnes Commentary on The New Testament, Thes.—Phil.** (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982), p. III.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Taylor, p. 22.

7 Ibid, p. 15.

8 F. C. Cook, **The Bible Commentary, Romans to Philemon** (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), p. 68.

CHAPTER 8

Lessons From The Church At Colossae

David Jones

Introduction

O*NCE AGAIN WE COUNT* it an extreme honor to be asked to participate in this lectureship program. Our love for and appreciation of the church of Christ meeting in Southaven continues to grow as the days and years pass. She has stood in the gap, carrying the Gospel to the world and exposing the sin and error which destroys the unity of the body of Christ. Her elders are to be commended for the fine way they have taken the oversight of the church. Their wives are also due praise and commendation for being so supportive of their work. We continue to value the friendships of B. J. Clarke, Bill Bryant, and their wonderful families as they labor as the evangelists for this exemplary church. These two men also are those who stand in the gap as God has directed.

The lectureships which have preceded this one have provided the brotherhood with some tremendous research material which we have found to be valuable in our work. We also appreciate the work which goes into such a program. Many hours of work must be performed and, most of the time, work without much thanks, but work which must be done nevertheless. It is done in such a loving way at Southaven and we take note and thank God for such work.

The subject of this lectureship is one which should interest the members of every local congregation, as it relates to the church which Jesus purchased. We find ourselves in an age where the importance of the church has been pushed to the background in far too many places. The inspired apostle Paul informed us that the church is the product of heaven's planning, preparing and perfecting:

Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ; And to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ: To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord (Eph. 3:8-11).

From all eternity, we say, God planned to send His Son to redeem mankind, requiring His blood as payment for sin and the purchase price for the church. Jesus instructed us to seek His kingdom first (Matt. 6:33). Mankind should observe the Lord's attitude toward the church and try to duplicate this in their lives, but sadly, many do not.

The Lord also provided for us examples in the Scriptures which are designed to help us in our daily living. Paul tells us explicitly this is the case:

For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope (Rom. 15:4)

Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come (1 Cor. 10:11).

While the above verses apply in the context to the Old Testament examples, we also have examples from the New Testament. The apostle Paul mentioned this fact to the brethren in Thessalonica: "So that ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia" (1 Thess. 1:7). The faith of the Romans was spoken of throughout the whole world (Rom. 1:8), and, no doubt, meant to be imitated. Paul said of himself, "Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1).

We learn both good and bad points and principles as we study these examples. We should learn lessons from the bad and try to follow the good points. The same is true as we observe congregations in the New Testament.

As we ponder the place in the Scriptures that the book of Colossians occupies, we notice the design as determined by God. We have first the four gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These books instruct us as to the life of Christ. In the Old Testament we see that the Savior and Deliverer was promised as coming. The gospel accounts tell us He was here, living among men and dying at the hands of these same men. These books also teach us another lesson. Matthew was written primarily to the Jews and Mark to the Romans. These books portray Christ as God's Son, thus designed to create faith in the minds of the Jews and Romans. The book of Luke emphasizes the subject of repentance, written primarily to the minds of the Greeks. The gospel according to John was written several years after the first three, combating the error of Gnosticism which declared Jesus Christ was not Deity and not the Son of God in the flesh.

So the Gospel accounts were written to produce faith and repentance and to cause men to confess the Deity of Christ. The book of Acts reveals to us how men were converted. In every instance of conversion, baptism is present. So men who had faith, repented of sins, and confessed the Deity of Christ, were baptized into Christ. The twenty-one epistles were all written for various and sundry reasons, but overall they were written to instruct those in certain locations how to live according to God's Law, handle problems which might arise, and combat the error Satan could devise and determine to spread. The book of Revelation was written to show Christians the victory which was possible only in Christ.

As we observe the plan of salvation, we see the pattern revealed in the Scriptures. We are to have faith, repent of our sins, confess the name of Christ, be baptized to wash away sins, live according to the Word of God, and then gain the victory in Christ. The church at Colossae, the subject of this study, fits into the area of the New Testament showing us how to live according to God.

Background Of The Church In Colossae

The City Of Colossae¹

The city of Colossae lay about one hundred miles east of Ephesus in Asia Minor, which is modern day Turkey. It was located in close proximity to Hieropolis and Laodicea in the Lycas valley. Hieropolis was a place noted for health, pleasure, and relaxation. Laodicea was known for commercial trade and politics. However, Colossae was just a small town which was influenced by her surrounding cities in a large way.²

The population of Colossae was comprised of both pagans and Jews. In the year 62 B.C., there were about 11,000 Jewish "freedmen" in the tri-city area. Antiochus

The Great (223-187 B.C.) had 2000 Jewish families transported from Mesopotamia and Babylon to Lydia and Phrygia. These Jews prospered greatly in the Lycus valley and attracted others of their own countrymen. The area was renowned for its great wealth and resorts. Even the Talmud noted the allure of the place by saying, "The wines and the baths of Phrygia have separated the ten tribes from Israel."³

The zenith of Greek philosophy had passed, but men still wondered about the universe and human life. It was an age of fear and speculation. The heavenly bodies were often thought of as affecting the welfare and destiny of human beings, because they were thought to be linked to deities and powerful spirits that could make life miserable or even interfere with the life to come. Mixed into this melting pot of religious ideas was the Greek notion of the opposition between spirit and matter. Man's hope was based on the freeing of the spirit from this evil material body. Therefore, it was to his advantage to regulate life with some care; hence, the denying of some bodily appetites was regarded as a means of purification.⁴ When one considers the mix of Jewish influence and the eastern religions of the pagans, he can surely see a problem which would exist if these religious persuasions were allowed to operate unchecked.

Even today we might ask some of these questions. Do the heavenly bodies have any influence over our lives? Is there any relationship between diet and spiritual living? Does God speak to us immediately, in our minds, or only through His Word, the Bible? Do the "eastern religions" have something to offer those who are Christians? As we look around, even in our world today, we see these questions being a matter of concern to the Lord's church, but they were also a concern in Paul's day.

The Church At Colossae

The establishment of the church in Colossae is a matter of speculation. Some say Paul possibly was the one who established it. However, the majority of scholars believe he did not establish it, nor did he visit the brethren in the flesh. They base their reasoning on the following verses:

Since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love which ye have to all the saints (Col. 1:4);

As ye also learned of Epaphras our dear fellowservant, who is for you a faithful minister of Christ; Who also declared unto us your love in the Spirit. For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding (1:7-9);

For I would that ye knew what great conflict I have for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh (2:1).

The verses certainly indicate Paul had “heard” of their faith from their servant Epaphras, who was a minister unto them. There were certainly some who had not seen him face to face. One idea of the establishment was during the time Paul was at Ephesus on an extended stay of work (Acts 19:8-10). The text indicates that the Word was spread throughout all Asia. It could have been one of Paul’s co-laborers who went out and did the actual preaching, resulting in the establishment of the church. From Paul’s own pen, it seems Epaphras was the one who did the preaching there (Col. 1:5-8; 4:12-13).

Another idea which exists is that Paul could have established the church in Colossae. The city of Colossae was in Phrygia and Paul went throughout Phrygia preaching:

Now when they had gone throughout Phrygia and the region of Galatia, and were forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia (Acts 16:6)

And after he had spent some time there, he departed, and went over all the country of Galatia and Phrygia in order, strengthening all the disciples (18:23).

In Colossians 2:1, Paul could have been simply contrasting Colossae and Laodicea with others who had not seen him in the flesh.⁵ However, it seems, from all the evidence and the weight of scholarship, that Paul did not personally establish the church but was closely tied to it through his co-workers. He seems to have heard of their faith and loyalty through these workers.

Time, Place, And Purpose Of The Writing

Colossians is one of the four “prison epistles” of Paul, probably being written during his imprisonment in Rome (Acts 28:16,30-31). The time of the writing was probably between 61-62 A.D.

Paul had received a report of the situation at Colossae by way of Epaphras (Col. 1:7-8). For the most part the report was favorable (2:5), but the report strongly indicated the fact that the church faced a twofold problem. One of the areas was the possibility of the church relapsing into paganism with its gross immorality (1:21-23; 2:6; 3:5-11). The other problem area was the accepting of the heresy which became known as “The Colossian Heresy.” This

heresy had four basic elements of concern: [1] philosophies of men, which denied the all-sufficiency of Christ (2:8); [2] Judaistic ceremonialism, i.e. attaching special significance to the rite of circumcision, food regulations, and observance of special days (2:11,16-17); [3] angel worship, detracting from the preeminence of Christ (2:18); [4] asceticism, calling for the harsh treatment of the body as the means to control its lusts (2:20-23).⁶

In order to warn them and guard against these errors, Paul writes to: [1] warn them against relapse (1:21-23); [2] warn them against the solution being urged upon them by those denying the all-sufficiency of Christ (2:8-23); [3] direct their attention to the "Beloved Son," "The All-Sufficient Savior."⁷

The true origin of this heresy is difficult to pinpoint, seeing it contained several components, all of which made contributions to it. There was a blend of embryonic Gnosticism, Judaistic elements, and a generous amount of mysticism. Philip Schaff offers a good general definition of the heresy:

The Colossian heresy was an Essenic and ascetic type of Gnosticism; it derived its ritualistic and practical elements from Judaism, its speculative elements from heathenism; it retained circumcision, the observance of Sabbath and New Moons, and the distinction of meats and drinks; but it mixed with the elements of crinetal mysticism and theosophy, the heathen notion of an evil principle, the worship of subordinate spirits, and an ascetic struggle for emancipation from the dominion of matter. It taught an antagonism between God and matter and interposed between them a series of angelic mediators as objects of worship. It thus contained the essential form, or a Christian

Essenism in its transition to Gnosticism. Cerinthus, in the age of John, represents a more developed stage, and forms a link between the Colossian heresy and the post-apostolic Gnosticism.⁸

To help us better understand the situation, we offer a series of definitions and explanations about each component of the heresy.

“Gnosticism” is from the Greek word (*gnosis*) which means “knowledge.” The term indicated claimed for itself superior knowledge above the realm of human observance. There was a conflict with which the heresy concerned itself: (1) creation and (2) evil. They believed matter was evil and could not be touched by God. New babes in Christ who were Gnostics had a difficult problem of just where Christ figured into the scheme. They solved this by alleging He was the lowest “aeon,” or emanation—a position which robbed Him of His Deity. This erroneous thinking led to many erroneous doctrines and positions.

Two views became prominent concerning Christ. One view was that Christ was all aeon and only seemed to be a human being. The other view was that the aeon, Christ, came upon the man, Jesus, at His baptism and left Him at the cross. Both views deny His Deity. The Gnostic viewpoint led to two other major views concerning the body and the spirit.

There was another problem with the Gnostic viewpoint: since the body is material and material is evil, therefore, the body must also be evil. If the body is evil, it needs to be deprived of its natural desires, and spiritual growth could only take place when one separates himself as far as possible from matter by refusing to give in to the desires of the body. Others contended that the soul could be pure even in a sinful body; thus, nothing done in the physical body affected the spiritual condition of the soul.⁹

Essenism was connected to members of a Jewish sect that existed in Palestine during the time of Christ. They are not mentioned in the New Testament. They were ascetics who practiced sharing their goods with the community, generally shunned marriage, refrained from attending worship in the Temple, and attached great importance to the study of the Scriptures. Many scholars associate the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in 1947 with an Essene community.¹⁰ The ascetic nature was seen to some degree in the error and heresy in Colossae.

Mysticism is defined by Webster's as "the belief that knowledge of God, or spiritual truth is obtained through immediate intuition or insight and in a way differing from the ordinary sense of perception or the use of logical reasoning."¹¹

Brother Warren gave an excellent summation of how Paul dealt with the error of the Colossian church:

1. "philosophy and vain deceit" shows that the teaching pretended to be philosophical (2:8).
2. the teaching had a Judaistic tendency.
3. it was "after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ" (2:8).
4. it involved the worship of and exaggeration of the powers of angels (2:10,15,18-19).
5. it involved the giving of great emphasis to outward forms.
6. it involved a weird combination of "false humility" with a mind which was "vainly puffed up" (2:18).
7. it involved a very strong ascetic tendency inspired by a conception that matter is evil (2:20-23).
8. it involved a limitation of the greatness and authority of Christ and the sufficiency of the salvation which He offered to man (2:8-10).¹²

While this error existed there, it appears from the tone of the book that it was not yet widespread; however, there was a strong potential to do so. It appears Epaphras' news of the congregation's love and faith delighted Paul.

Lessons We Learn From Colossae

Christ Is The Preeminent One

Gnosticism attacked the Deity of Christ, dethroning Him to just one of many "aeons." The false teachers convinced some they had to supplant the Gospel with other teachings in order for it to be complete. The Gospel could not be complete in their doctrine because Christ was not complete.

Paul answered them well. First he showed Christ was the One responsible for the creation, instead of having to be created Himself:

For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and by him all things consist (Col. 1:16-17).

How could Christ have been created if He was "before" all things? How could He have been created if by Him "all things consist"?

The Gnostics taught one had to have knowledge superior to Christ, and that this knowledge was "super," that is, above being able to reason and learn this. God revealed through this letter that in Christ all the treasures of wisdom dwelled: "In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (2:3). Paul also showed them that they were totally complete in Christ: "For in him dwelleth

all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power” (2:9-10). The Holy Spirit also instructed us that the Christ was Deity in that He was a member of the Godhead and that He was a member of the Godhead in the physical body. Of course, the Gnostics taught spirit and flesh could not mix, but the Holy Spirit corrected that error in Colossae.

The Danger Of False Teaching Is Shown In Colossae

Satan is relentless in his attacks on God and His creation. He manifested such attacks in the garden of Eden and has not relinquished any of his persistence. Apparently there was great faith in Colossae (Col. 1:4). Anywhere faith is shown through love and works, Satan will be there also, trying to undermine and overthrow the faith of as many as possible. Shipwrecked faith is a tragedy and it is a necessary by-product of false teaching. Paul spoke of the wrecked faith of some:

 Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck: Of whom is Hymenaeus and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme (1 Tim. 1:19-20).

The end result of a shipwrecked faith is eternity with Satan and separated from God and His glory.

Paul also spoke of hope in the book of Colossians (Col. 1:5). Paul spoke of having that hope because it is contained “in the word of the truth of the gospel.” False teaching will remove hope and replace it with a pseudo-hope. Slowly, but surely, Satan will lead people from the Truth and replace the Truth with just enough false teaching as to poison the heart and mind. He will blind

them to the Truth and illuminate the error. Paul spoke of his ability:

But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: In whom the God of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them (2 Cor. 4:3-4).

Another tragedy of false teaching is that those who are led away are taken captive by Satan. Paul spoke of this in the book of Colossians: “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ” (Col. 2:8). The idea of being “spoiled” is to be taken captive. Paul warned them to beware of this heresy which was forming and not to be taken captive by the philosophy of men. They needed to remain true to Christ, which would mean remaining true to His Word.

The Importance Of Being A Servant Is Seen In The Life Of Epaphras

Paul called Epaphras a faithful minister (Col. 1:7). It is a worthy goal indeed to seek to be simply a faithful minister for the Lord and to the brethren. Some men spend their whole lives seeking to have fame and fortune here in this life. The Bible encourages us to seek to be simply a servant. Jesus set that example for us: “Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). The apostle Paul revealed to the Philippians that Jesus made Himself of no reputation, but came to earth in the likeness of men and took the form of a servant for one purpose—to die in our place (Phil. 2:6-8). Peter tells us Jesus left us an example that we should follow: “For even hereunto were

ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps” (1 Pet. 2:21).

One reason why we should learn the lesson from Epaphras is that our servitude will determine whether or not we are saved. When Jesus gathers the nations before Him in judgment (Matt. 25:31-46), He will examine their works to see if they served. Those who did serve will be counted as sheep and those who did not will be counted as goats. We learn the lesson of servitude from the church at Colossae and we need to heed it.

The Fact That A Congregation May Be Small And Seemingly Insignificant Does Not Exclude It From Being Attacked By Satan

Sometimes brethren feel as though, since they are not some “big-named congregation” in the brotherhood, or, because they may not have the problems a larger congregation faces, they do not need to hear sermons and lessons on false teaching and false teachers. They feel like that is only happening “over there,” wherever that is! Satan stirred up a hotbed of heresy in the little congregation of Colossae. Satan is willing to take it one step at a time, one small congregation and then another. Sometimes we do not want to do things unless they are huge and honor-bearing for us. Satan is patient but persistent, and we need to learn this lesson from Colossae.

The Works Done In This Body Do Affect Our Eternal Destiny

The Gnostics developed a system of thought which said the works we do in this body have nothing to do with our spirit’s condition. Therefore, a person was free to do what he or she desired in an attempt to beat back the flesh and escape its corruptions and be headed to “spiritual utopia.” Notice what Paul instructed the Christians they needed to do since they had been raised with Christ:

Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry: For which things' sake the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience: In the which ye also walked some time, when ye lived in them. But now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth. Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds (Col. 3:5-9).

Why did Paul instruct them to mortify, or put to death, those sins if they had no effect on the spirit? He even told them God's wrath would be poured out on those who walked in them. Those who walked in them were those who lived in them. It is possible to "live in sin" by constantly practicing this and never repenting of it.

Conclusion

The church at Colossae provides for us many great lessons. It is evidence of God's grace, as there were those who had been translated from the power of darkness into the kingdom of His dear Son (Col. 1:13-14). The love brethren are to have is shown in Colossae. However, the work of Satan is also evident in Colossae, as he had invaded the walls of God's house with his false teaching. We need to pay close attention to this congregation and ponder the lessons for our sakes today. May God help us heed the warning and ever follow the pattern laid for us in His Holy Word.

Endnotes

1 The author is indebted to Roy J. Hearn for his valuable paper entitled "The Colossian Heresy."

2 "The Epistle to the Colossians," "Colossians Introduction," An outline from The "Executable Outlines" Series, at address, http://ccl.wheaton.edu/contrib/exec_outlines/col/col_01.htm.

3 McGee, Pat, **The Living Messages of the Books of the New Testament**, eds. Garland Elkins & Thomas B. Warren (Jonesboro, AR: National Christian Press, 1976), p. 185.

4 Ibid, pp. 185-186.

5 Moffitt, Jerry, **The Book of Colossians**, eds. Garland Elkins & Thomas B. Warren (Pulaski, TN: Sain Publications, 1986), p. 4.

6 “The Epistle to the Colossians” outline.

7 “The Epistle to the Colossians,” Introduction to the Epistle, An outline from The “Executable Outlines” Series, at address, http://ccel.wheaton.edu/contrib/exec_outlines/col/col_01.htm.

8 Philip Schaff, **History of the Christian Church, I** (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1952), p. 772f.

9 Thomas Warren, **The Book of Colossians** (Pulaski, TN: Sain Publications, 1986), pp. 19-20.

10 **Holman Bible Electronic Dictionary.**

11 “Mysticism,” **Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary** (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam, 1949), p. 557.

12 Warren, p. 20.

CHAPTER 9

Lessons From The Church At Sardis

Jason Roberts

Introduction

THE THEME OF THIS year's lectureship is "The Lord's Church: Past, Present, Future." Indeed, the church of our Lord has a rich past, a radiant present and a rewarding future! And while it is certainly true that the church of Christ has a great heritage and a glorious future, unfortunately these sentiments do not negate the fact that the church is presently in the midst of some heated battles. Therefore, a careful consideration of the churches of the New Testament will ably equip every soldier therein to possess the necessary ammunition to avoid their weaknesses and to duplicate their strengths.

It has been said that any people who forget their history are doomed to repeat it. The church today cannot afford to overlook the supreme relevance of the lessons learned from the inspired letters written to the churches of the New Testament. These lessons are monumental, and if they are glossed over, disastrous consequences may result presently and, more important, eternally.

Sardis, The Church Of The Living Dead

Of the seven churches of Asia, Sardis was the least attractive in the eyes of Christ. In fact, considering the brief statement concerning the "few which have not defiled

their garments” (Rev. 3:4), the Lord’s appraisal of this church is vivid and sharp:

And unto the angel of the church in Sardis, write;
These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits
of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works,
that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art
dead (3:1).

Sardis had a sterling reputation and a glorious history. Unfortunately the way they perceived themselves and the way Christ perceived them were vastly different. The only true perception of the current condition of a church that really matters is the perception seen through the eyes of an all-seeing God (2 Chron. 16:9; Psm. 11:4; Prov. 5:21; 15:3; Heb. 4:13).

A church may picture and pride themselves as being spiritually alive, when in reality the Lord’s estimation of them is that they are spiritually dead. Even though approximately 1,600 years have now passed since Sardis was destroyed, out of the dust of antiquity her message of warning to all apathetic, indifferent, lukewarm, lethargic congregations springs forth as timely as today’s newspaper. Truly, God has sounded the alarm clock to these congregations, and they had better cease hitting the snooze button (Rom. 13:11; Eph. 5:14-16).

The Setting Of Sardis

No one can truly appreciate the significance of the letter to the church at Sardis without first considering some background information of the city itself. What was it like to live in the city of Sardis? Whatever happened to the ancient city of Sardis? These and other questions will be answered as one glances at the city from a historical standpoint and a present standpoint.

Sardis Historically

Approximately seven hundred years before the apostle John penned this letter, Sardis became one of the greatest cities of the ancient world. Under the dominion of the king of Lydia, it had magnificence, luxury and nearly unlimited wealth. Sardis was located thirty miles southeast of Thyatira, on the side of Mount Tmolus, on the river Pactolus. It was not long before Sardis became one of the world's great trading centers, literally commanding the Hermus Valley. It was the center of five different roads, and like a magnet attracted trade and wealth to itself.

Sardis had been the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia and, in the sixth century B.C., was ruled by an extremely wealthy king whose name, Croesus, became a proverb of unlimited wealth. It was common to hear people (years ago) say "...as rich as Croesus." It was under his reign that the first coins were minted in Asia Minor—the birthplace of modern money. "It was with him that Sardis reached its zenith and it was with him that it plunged to disaster."¹ Speaking of their wealth, the historian Ridpath said, "A great cause of the prosperity and wealth of the Lydian Kingdom was the natural fertility of the country. No other of all Asia had so rich a soil."² Unfortunately, the more wealthy Sardis grew, the more spiritually bankrupt she became. And ultimately her physical prosperity blinded her to her spiritual needs (cf. Luke 12:15-21; 16:19-31).

Sardis also possessed great military power, which should come as no surprise as one considers that it was built on a plateau of crumbling rock 1,500 feet above the valley. The plateau was part of Mount Tmolus, whose height was 6,700 feet. The sides of the plateau were sheer cliffs, and the city was inaccessible except by one narrow passage which was steep and easily fortified and guarded.

Looking at Sardis from a distance was like looking at a gigantic watchtower above the Hermus Valley. Sardis was considered to be an impregnable fortress—so she thought.

As Croesus and his people relished their luxury, splendor, and prosperity, they became spiritually degenerate. Pompous in their self-confidence, they thought their wealth would last forever. In his arrogance, Croesus recklessly declared war on Cyrus of Persia, which would ultimately bring about the city's demise. In order to get to the armies of Cyrus, Croesus had to cross the Halys River. He sought counsel of the famous Oracle at Delphi and was told, "If you cross the River Halys, you will destroy a great empire." Croesus took the message as a promise that he would utterly annihilate the Persians. What he never considered was that the great empire he would destroy would be his own. Croesus crossed the river, engaged in battle, eventually was routed, but was not worried. He simply retired to the impregnable Citadel of Sardis for the day and strategically prepared for the next day's battle. But Cyrus laid siege to the city. He patiently waited for fourteen days, then offered a special reward to anyone who could find an entry into Sardis.³

One of the soldiers in Cyrus' army, Hyeroeades, had been carefully surveying the land structure of the city and noticed that the composition of the rock upon which Sardis stood had cracks and faults in it. One evening, as he stood watching the wall from above, he had seen a Sardian soldier drop his helmet off the edge. The soldier made his way down what appeared to be a crevice below the wall, emerged outside, retrieved his helmet, and disappeared back inside. The watching warrior reasoned that there must be a crack large enough to let a man through the wall. He knew that if one man could make his way into the city, then an entire army could (by single file) accomplish the same. That evening he led a band of Persian

troops up through a fault in the rock. When they arrived, they found it completely unguarded and the soldiers of the city asleep. Under the cover of darkness, he and his men opened the gates of the “impregnable” city, and Sardis fell that night. A city that prided itself for being watchful for external enemies truly knew the import of the Lord’s words “Be watchful,” and truly learned that the real enemy was from within! Unfortunately, the story does not end here.

The city soon disappeared from history under Persian rule for two centuries until it fell to Alexander the Great and became a Greek city. Sardis was now on the verge of repeating history— and she did.

Upon Alexander’s death, his generals fought each other to determine who would become the new ruler of Greece. One of the rivals, Antiochus, became the ruler of the area that included Sardis. At war with another of the rivals, he sought refuge in the city of Sardis. For a year he managed to defend the city. Then one of the soldiers of Antiochus, named Lagoras, repeated the maneuver of Cyrus. At night, a band of soldiers crept up the steep cliffs and entered the city through a crack. There was no guard. The Sardians had forgotten their history lesson. The city fell again that night because they were not watching.⁴

Soon after, the Romans arrived on the scene. Sardis became a Roman town. In 17 A.D. it was devastated by an earthquake. Though the city was rebuilt, it never regained its former glory.⁵

When this epistle was written, the city was rapidly declining in prestige and glory, but its inhabitants were still reveling within the laurels of the ancient past. Death and decay were inevitable, but the Sardians refused to recognize the fate of their city and continued to live on its ancient glory. The city had a name only, whereas in reality it was dead and on the brink of spiritual extinction. Like

Ephesus, the city and church began with a glorious history and ended up in a heap of ruins.

Sardis Presently

The Goths took Sardis in 400 A.D. Today, all that is left of the glorious grandeur of Sardis is Sart, a miserable village containing a few shacks standing in an unhealthy desert, with ruins and thorns.

Establishment Of The Church At Sardis

Trying to pinpoint the precise details which led to the establishment of this church is difficult. However, the inspired Luke gives us some evidence that the apostle Paul was instrumental in planting the seed which would later produce the harvest of Christians dwelling in Sardis. Luke records, “Paul came to Ephesus...reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. And this continued by the space of two years; so that all they which dwelt in Asia heard the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:1,9-10). Dick Daughtry, in his excellent research on the church at Sardis, noted:

The church in Ephesus grew under the powerful influence and teaching of the apostle. Christianity radiated from this center. These events led to the evangelization of the Roman province of Asia. The seven churches and other congregations in the province appear to have originated from the preaching of Paul or the preaching of those whom Paul taught during his residence in Ephesus.⁶

The Situation At Sardis

By the time the apostle John wrote what Jesus told him to write to Sardis, the city was again wealthy and

severely degenerate. Once again the Sardians' zeal and enthusiasm cooled; consequently, apostasy began knocking at their door. Twice the city had been destroyed because its inhabitants were too apathetic to keep watch. Once again, the attitude of self-complacency had surfaced and was deeply prevalent in the church. Within the city was a church, the church of Christ, meeting in Sardis. It, too, reflected the degeneracy of the time. It was lazy, careless and apathetic. It, too, was not watching. It, too, was about to fall. Why did the spiritual condition of the church plummet?

First, they were resting in the past rather than reaching for the future. As noted earlier, "The city was noted for material wealth, but lacking in moral health. Here was a city with the gold of selfishness but with no soul of selflessness. Its citizens were loose-living and pleasure-loving."⁷ This church was primarily functioning from accomplishments and glories of the past. Once they had done great things for God—now they had nothing left but memories.

Churches today may have a rich and glorious heritage, but that is not a guarantee of present faithfulness and allegiance to God. Only by enthroning Christ and His church supremely upon our hearts can we have a surefire guarantee of faithfulness to God (Matt. 6:33). Sardis at one time was a church on fire for God, but tragically the flames of zeal cooled into ashes, leaving only a few spiritual embers burning within the rubbish (Rev. 3:4).

This is so true of some Christians today. Once they were happy and active in service, but today they live in cold neglect of their Christian responsibilities.⁸ Once they could hardly wait to go to church—now they consider every trip to the worship service as a duty or a chore. Once they enthusiastically sang "Standing On The Promises," but now they are found silent, sitting on the premises. Once

they considered giving of their prosperity as a blessing—now it has become a burden.

It reminds me of the father who asked his son a question one Sunday after he came home from church. He said, “What did the preacher preach about today, son?” His son said, “Refrigeration.” “Refrigeration?” asked the father. His son said, “Yes, many are cold and a few are frozen.” This was the spiritual condition of Sardis. They were cold and frozen in the past rather than “Looking unto Jesus...” and the future of achieving greater things for God (Heb. 12:2).

Second, they were careless in their convictions. The Lord admonished them to, “...**strengthen the things that remain**” (Rev. 3:2). The convictions which many at Sardis once held dear had now become careless in their hearts. They were no longer concerned about spiritual matters. The church had **quantity** but not **quality**. The salt had lost its savor (Matt. 5:13).⁹

The sin of Sardis was a sin that is still very much prevalent in the church today, and that is the sin of apathy. Apathy is unconcern. It is uninterest and carelessness, all wrapped up together. It has potentially deadly branches which include negligence, indifference, and lethargy. It is spiritual numbness that can eventually become paralysis. It is the temperature of being lukewarm. The apathy at Sardis had grown to such an extent that the door of apostasy had fully swung open. Christ said, “Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are **ready to die**” (Rev. 3:2, emp. mine, JR).

Paul gave a similar exhortation to the church in Ephesus when he said, “Awake thou that sleepest and arise from the dead and Christ shall give thee light” (Eph. 5:14). The church in Sardis had sunk so low that it was now devoid of life and had no struggles going on within it. William Barclay astutely observed, “A church is in danger

of dying when it begins to worship its own past...when it is more concerned with material than it is spiritual things.”¹⁰

Those who are apathetic all share one thing in common. Their lives develop cracks that become unguarded. Ultimately, if they do not wake up from their stupor, they are entirely overthrown by the enemy.

Because of their carelessness, their works, or deeds, the members at Sardis were described by the Lord as being not “perfect” or complete (Rev. 3:2b). “In other words, their works had not been completed so as to win the approval of God.”¹¹ Because the church was more concerned about its reputation in Sardis, they became unconcerned about their reputation in heaven.¹² Perhaps they had good intentions of completing their works. They had programs, goals, and aspirations to fulfill and reach, but they never finished the task or the dream.

Many churches today are not that much different from Sardis. How many good programs are suggested and set forth by the elders of the congregation, and carried out for a while by their sheep, only to see them crash and burn soon thereafter? It should be noted that church programs do not die—brethren die! And a congregation that is not on fire from above is in danger of fire from below!

The ministers in Sardis are partially to blame for the spiritual lethargy which existed in the Sardians. Preachers have to be alive, in order for the people to whom they preach to be alive. The reason why some congregations become spiritually “dead” is because “dead” men preach to them. Brother Richard Curry, esteemed instructor of the Memphis School of Preaching, used to tell us preaching students that if we cannot put any fire in our sermons then we need to put our sermons in the fire! 2 Tim. 4:1-5 is a Divine wake up call for some of our preachers.

The Solution For Sardis

The remedy for the spiritually lethal condition of the church at Sardis is fourfold. **First, they were to be watchful** (Rev. 3:2a). A lesson that the city had failed to heed twice in the past is here given by our Lord. However, this warning had nothing to do with the physical structure of the city of Sardis; rather, it referred to the spiritual condition of the church's members. Churches today need to be watchful. They need to watch for: false teachers, temptation, the wiles of the devil, and the second coming of Christ (Acts 20:29-31; Matt. 26:41; 1 Pet. 5:8; Eph. 6:11; Matt. 25:13; 1 John 2:28).¹³

Second, they were to strengthen the things which remained (Rev. 3:2a). Their works were good, but incomplete in the eyes of Christ. They needed to put the life back into their labor. Paul talked about us being a people "zealous of good works," "always abounding in the work of the Lord," "created in Christ Jesus unto good works" (Titus 2:14; 1 Cor. 15:58; Eph. 2:10).

J. T. Marlin observed that "apparently some of the members were very weak and sickly, ready to die spiritually."¹⁴ It is the responsibility of every member who realizes that brethren are spiritually sick to immediately come to their aid (Gal. 6:1-2; Jas. 5:19-20; Rom. 15:1). The church has no problem, generally speaking, of coming to assist its members who are suffering from a physical malady, yet, we are seemingly unconcerned about assisting members who are suffering from a spiritual malady—which is more life threatening!

Third, they were to remember all things that they had received and were to hold onto them tightly (Rev. 3:3). They had let go of the most treasured possession one could ever possess—the Truth. They had received it, but did not hold onto it. Paul admonished Timothy with the following words:

Hold fast the form of sound words which thou hast heard of me in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. That good thing which was committed unto thee keep by the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in us (2 Tim. 1:13-14).

The inspired writer declared the value of truth when he said, "Buy the truth and sell it not" (Prov. 23:23). When a person learns the Truth and obeys it, then he is not for sale at any price; otherwise he will lose his immortal soul (Matt. 16:26).

Fourth, they were commanded to repent (Rev. 3:3). The word "repent" seems to be the key word in each of the seven letters to the churches in Asia. If they neglected the command to repent they would certainly perish (Luke 13:3,5). God expects no less of His people today (Acts 17:30). It is repent or perish for congregations who have lost their spiritual fervor. Sardis was in this condition, and God only knows how many other congregations are in the same boat, drifting aimlessly, only soon to crash upon the rocks of destruction.

The Seriousness Of Heeding Christ's Solution

A failure on the part of Sardis to heed the Lord's solution would be spiritually disastrous. He said, "If therefore thou shalt not watch. I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee" (Rev. 3:3). The church in Sardis was in spiritual quicksand and did not even realize it. Like Samson, Sardis would not even realize when the Lord would depart from them. The seriousness of Christ's warning here could not be overlooked any longer. Just as a modern day thief never announces his arrival via telegram, so our Lord would come upon Sardis suddenly and secretly bringing swift destruction. Brother Foy E. Wallace, Jr. wrote:

This warning compares to that of Paul in 1 Thess. 5:1-2, and applies to the manner, not the time, of His coming. While they reposed in their spiritual slumber, the events depicted would unexpectedly overwhelm them. The warning was a picture of their spiritual state of unpreparedness. It was not a reference to the time of His advent, but it did refer to His coming in the events of judgment, and His coming as a thief meant that they were not alert and ready.¹⁵

Jesus expects us to be watching and ready for His arrival (Matt. 25:13; 1 John 2:28).

The Salvation Of Sardis

In the midst of this dead congregation, there was life: “Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy” (Rev. 3:4). God always has a faithful few individuals who have kept themselves “unspotted from the world” (Jas. 1:27b). It is these who are described as one day having the privilege of walking with the Lord. Alexander Maclaren beautifully penned three important truths concerning this worthy walk.

First, there is the promise of continuous and progressive activity—“They shall walk.” The word “walk” in the Bible is frequently synonymous with a way of life, an outward action (Gen. 5:22; Eph. 4:1; 5:2,15). Heaven will be a place of eternal rest, but we will be active (cf. Rev. 22:3).

Second, there is the companionship of Christ—“They shall walk *with me*.” We sing, “Hand in Hand with Jesus...I walk each day.” What a great thrill and overwhelming sense of joy it is to ponder one day actually walking hand in hand with our Savior—yes, the same hands that bled for us!

Third, there is the promise of the perfection of purity—“They shall walk with me *in white*.” In ancient times, white clothes symbolized three things: (1) purity, for only the pure in heart shall see God (Matt. 5:8), (2) festivity and perfection, showing the garments necessary to attend the marriage feast of the Lamb, and (3) victory, showing that only those who endure to the end shall be saved (Rev. 2:10; 7:14).¹⁶

Those who would be saved in the church at Sardis would be the ones who overcame the things in this world. Revelation 12 depicts how we can overcome Satan, our arch enemy: “And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death” (12:11). Someone has well observed that the theme of the Book of Revelation is Victory! And if one overcomes in this life, then he can come over to the next life. The blessings for those who overcome are threefold.

First, they shall be clothed in white raiment (Rev. 3:5)—again symbolizing their purity and preparedness before Christ. As a bride is adorned in white apparel for her bridegroom physically, we, too, must be clothed in white apparel spiritually when the bridegroom cometh (Matt. 25:1-13).

Second, their names would not be blotted out of the book of life (Rev. 3:5). The heavenly register of the redeemed is seen in numerous places in the Bible (Exod. 32:32; Psm. 139:16; Mal. 3:16; Dan. 12:1; Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3-4; Rev. 20:15; 21:27). The popular doctrine of “Once Saved Always Saved” is utterly destroyed by Revelation 3:5. If a name is recorded in the book of life, then that implies salvation at one point in time. Yet, Jesus said that “He that overcometh” will not have his name blotted out of the book of life. What about the person who does not overcome?

Third, their names would be personally confessed before God (Rev. 3:5b). If we confess the name of Christ here, then He will confess our names before the Father in heaven (Matt. 10:32-33). Imagine the great joy of standing before God on that momentous and final day. In the background there is the heavenly grandstand of all the faithful (Heb. 12:1), and all the innumerable angels watching and waiting for your glorious entrance into the heavenly realm. Then, for a brief moment there, is complete silence, and Jesus Christ will then (as it were) say to His Father, “Father, it is My privilege to present to You .” Will your name be confessed on that great day? Is your name presently in the Lamb’s book of life?

Endnotes

1 From the sermon notes of Dan Winkler, **How Do You Raise The (Spiritually) Dead?** (Nashville: Crieve Hall Church of Christ).

2 **The Seven Cities of Asia Minor** (article taken from the Internet), p. 1.

3 J. T. Marlin, **The Seven Churches of Asia Minor** (Nashville: Williams Printing), p. 110.

4 Ibid, p. 111.

5 Windell F. Fikes, **The Historical Background Of The 7 Churches of Asia**, “A Study Of The Seven Churches Of Asia,” *Seek The Old Paths Lectureship*, ed. Garland M. Robinson (Corinth, MS: Old Paths Publishing, 1996), p. 36.

6 Dick Daughtry, “The Church In Sardis,” **Churches Of The New Testament**, (Fort Worth: The Manney Company, 1963), pp. 203-204.

7 Ibid, p. 203.

8 W. Herschel Ford, **Simple Sermons On The Seven Churches Of Revelation**, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1959), pp. 64-75.

9 Ibid, p. 76.

- 10 Ray C. Stedman, **The Church Of The Zombies** (Palo Alto, CA: Discovery Publishing, 1995), p. 3.
- 11 Daughtry, p. 206.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 John Stacy, **Preaching Through Revelation** (Winona, MS: J. C. Choate Publications, 1983), p. 49.
- 14 Marlin, pp. 117-118.
- 15 Foy E. Wallace, Jr., **The Book Of Revelation** (Fort Worth: Foy E. Wallace, Jr. Publications, 1966), p. 98.
- 16 Alexander Maclaren, **Expositions Of Holy Scriptures, John, Jude, and Revelation** (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), pp. 244-247.

CHAPTER 10

Lessons From The Church At Rome

Keith Mosher, Sr.

Preface

THIS UNPRECEDENTED STUDY OF the churches of the New Testament during one lectureship is a wonderful effort and much needed. Brethren Bill Pierce, Coleman Simpson, Larry Everson, B. J. Clarke, Bill Bryant, and all of the faithful at the Southaven congregation deserve a huge thank-you for putting together, in one volume, a series of essays that should become a most useful study aid in every Christian's library. Bible study is, sadly, not a number one priority for far too many members of the church, and the result is that churches of Christ, in America especially, are suffering from an identity crisis. Perhaps this volume will rekindle the spark of understanding among baptized believers that the New Testament church is God's only body of people on the earth.

Too, the author has been privileged to teach the **Epistle to the Romans** for three months every year since 1984, but he has never been asked before to concentrate on the church at Rome. Such a challenge is and was most interesting and welcome. To note the faith of the early Christians in Rome and then to trace their eventual, horrendous apostasy was an eye-opener (again) and a reminder of how close every generation of the church is to losing its faith.

Prayers of thanksgiving for this **POWER Lectureship's** study and prayers that all will peruse every

lecture offered in this volume are offered to the Father. May God bless this lectureship and every other effort being made by the faithful to stem the tide of apostasy among churches of Christ at the end of the twentieth century.

Introduction

During the reign of Augustus Caesar, a child was born whose name was Jesus (Luke 2:17).¹ That “child” was destined to rule a kingdom more vast than the Caesars had ever imagined. Some historians have found it “striking” that, synchronous with the establishment of the Roman empire, Christianity appeared in the world.² Ironically, at the same time that certain factors in the Roman system were conducive to the rise of Christianity, Rome became the greatest enemy of the early church.³ The Caesars, however evil they may have been, actually prepared the way for the church, and even the persecution and martyrdom of those New Testament brethren became factors in strengthening Christendom’s hold on that ancient world. Briefly, some of the factors are listed below that were inherent in the Roman empire and beneficial to the spread of Jesus’ kingdom on earth.

The Roman empire of Jesus’ time was at peace.⁴ All civil war had ceased along with the cessation of national conflicts.⁵ Latourette notes:

At the time when Christianity began...conditions in the Mediterranean world prepared the way for the spread of a new religious faith throughout the entire extent of that area... Augustus...brought peace to a world which had long been distraught by wars between the contending states, by civil strife between factions and ambitious leaders, and by the piracy which had flourished in the time of disorder.⁵

A second factor contributing to the spread of early Christianity in Rome was the cosmopolitan nature of the cities.⁷ Jesus had commanded that the Gospel be preached to “all nations” (Matt. 28:18-20). Those early preachers could find nearly every nation then known in any large city to which they traveled!⁸

Cosmopolitanism gave rise to an eclectic manner of thinking, which mutual exchange of thought was favorable to the reception of the ideas of a new religion—Christianity.⁹ Roman “gods” were unpopular with most at the time, and Stoicism’s universal appeal to peace and individualism had, together, laid a seed bed for Christian thought.¹⁰

Another important factor was the universal use of the Greek language.¹¹ Angus notes that Greek was known in “Northern India, at the Parthian court, and on the distant shores of the Euxine (Black Sea). The native land of the gospel was surrounded on all sides by Greek civilization.”¹²

Travel was easier because of the extensive Roman “iters” (roads), and many Jews were dispersed all over the empire so that Paul, for example, could go anywhere and find Jewish contacts to whom the apostle could begin preaching the Gospel (cf. Acts 13-28). It was into that ancient world of peace, universalism, ethnic eclecticism, and easy travel that the church at Rome was born.

Apostolic Establishment Of The Church?

There is no historical record of just when Christianity was introduced to the city of Rome.¹³ By the time the apostle Paul arrived at the capital of the empire, Christians were already congregating in southern Italy and Rome:

And after three months we departed in a ship of Alexandria, which had wintered in the isle,

whose sign was Castor and Pollux. And landing at Syracuse we tarried there three days. And from thence we fetched a compass and came to Rhegium: and after one day the south wind blew, and we came the next day to Puteoli: (southern Italy, KM) Where we found brethren and were desired to tarry with them seven days: and so we went toward Rome. And from thence (Rome, KM), when the brethren (from Rome, KM) heard of us, they came to meet us as far as Appii forum, and the Three Taverns, whom when Paul saw, he thanked God and took courage. And when we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard; but Paul was suffered to dwell by himself with a soldier that kept him (Acts 28:11-16).

Latourette adds: "Through Paul's **Letters to the Romans** (sic) and what we read in **Acts of the Apostles**, we are aware of a strong Christian community in Rome within less than a generation after the resurrection. Precisely how it came to be we are not told."¹⁴

That any apostle, especially Peter, established the church in Rome is doubtful at best and seems to be a completely impossible fact because of a statement by Paul to the church at Rome. Paul wrote: "For I long to see you that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift to the end ye may be established" (Rom. 1:11).

It is a well-understood Biblical proposition that only the apostles could impart spiritual (miraculous) gifts to another Christian (2 Cor. 12:12). The latter doctrine is illustrated in Acts 8:12-18. The evangelist Philip, a former servant of the church in Jerusalem and one endowed with miraculous power, was preaching in Samaria (Acts 8:5-11). Yet, after Philip had baptized certain Samaritans, in order for them to receive supernatural gifts of the Holy

Spirit, the apostles Peter and John had to come from Jerusalem to Samaria (8:14-16). The Bible record is that Peter and John laid hands on the Samaritans and **only then** did the latter receive supernatural power (8:16-17). So, for Paul to insist that the brethren in Rome were not completely established in spiritual gifts has to mean that those ancient Christians had (at least not all had) met an apostle (Rom. 1:11).

However, Roman Catholic tradition has long insisted that Peter did come to Rome and was martyred there.¹⁵ The tradition has its roots in the early “church fathers,” especially Cyprian, who insisted that the church was founded on the *Cathedra Petri* or “seat of Peter.”¹⁶ Roman bishops tried to make “practical use” of Cyprian’s theory and, since Rome (along with Constantinople, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria) occupied such a strategic position in the empire, those Roman bishops obtained much esteem and popularity.¹⁷

A further historical incident that feeds the Catholic tradition comes from a rather dubious comment by the fourth-century diarist Eusebius. Eusebius insisted that Peter went to Rome to challenge the same Simon whom Peter, while in Samaria, had condemned for trying to purchase apostolic, miraculous power (Acts 8:18-22).¹⁸ Eusebius writes:

Immediately under the reign of Claudius, by the benign and gracious providence of God, Peter, that powerful and great apostle, who by his courage took the lead of all the rest, was conducted to Rome against this pest (Simon, KM) of mankind.¹⁹

Eusebius’s comment is known now to be based on a gross misunderstanding by Justin Martyr, who viewed a statue

in Rome of the god *Semo Sanctus* and mistakenly assumed it was “Simon Magus.”²⁰ The tradition then arose that Peter came to Rome to challenge his old “enemy.” The Biblical account is that Peter showed Simon how to be forgiven and that hardly seems as if Peter and Simon would be enemies (Acts 8:22).

In recent history, on a Christmas day, the Roman Catholic Church announced that the bones of Peter had been unearthed from beneath the Basilica in Rome. Newspaper accounts at the time heralded the amazing discovery. One wonders how anyone knew that the bones were Peter’s. Were they stamped with his name? There were no dental records kept in the first century and the ancients did not know about DNA. How did the Catholics know the bones were Peter’s? Rome said so. But, the evidence is as sublimely wanting as are the unproven and obscure traditions noted above. It is no wonder that modern historians agree that “It is highly unlikely, however, that he (Peter, KM) was the founder of the Roman Christian community.”²¹

A further statement found in the writings of Iranaeus needs attention here. He wrote that “Matthew wrote his gospel while Peter and Paul were in Rome and founding the church there.”²² Iranaeus does not prove his statement nor tell the reader how he knew such a “fact.” Biblical history as already noted above proves that the church in Rome existed **before** Paul ever arrived (Acts 28).²³

Was Peter Ever In Rome?

It may seem to some that proving that Peter was never in Rome is somehow degrading of the memory of that great apostle. Not so, for Peter himself insisted that he was no more than a “fellow elder” to other church leaders and that there existed only one “super” Bishop of the soul, Jesus (1 Pet. 5:1-5). Was the “impulsive” Peter ever in Rome?

According to **Acts of the Apostles**, Peter was in Jerusalem about A.D. 51 and spoke at the council there concerning Judaizing attempts to insist on circumcision as necessary to salvation (Acts 15:7-11). About two or three years later, Peter is located at Antioch in Syria (Gal. 2:11).

Later, about A.D. 60, Paul writes to the church in Rome and mentions the names of twenty-seven Christians (Rom. 16:3-15). Not one of those is Peter, which seems rather odd if Peter were the first “pope” of that church and actually founded it! Was Paul so “jealous” of Peter’s position that Paul refused to mention Peter’s name **or**, more to the point, was the **beloved** brother of Paul just **not** there (cf. 2 Pet. 3:16-18)?

Around A.D. 62-64, Paul was in Rome (Acts 28). That great apostle to the Gentiles penned six letters from his Roman cell (Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians, Philemon, 1 Timothy, and Titus) and not one time, in any part of any of those missives, does Paul mention Peter. Why? If Peter were the leader in Rome, why was he not interested in at least contacting Paul about his imprisonment? In actual fact, neither Paul nor Luke (in Acts) ever hint that Peter was anywhere near Rome.

Later, circa A.D. 68, Paul wrote to Timothy for the second time. Again, Paul was imprisoned and this time expecting his death (2 Tim. 4:6-8). And, again, even though Paul **is** in Rome, there is no mention of Peter nor of some “papal” influence being exerted to secure Paul’s release. In fact, Paul always insisted that the Head of the church was in heaven, not on earth (Eph. 1:20-23).

Only shaky tradition without a Biblical foundation is the basis for anyone’s surmising that Peter had ever been in Rome. In fact, Peter, while penning his first epistle, insisted that he was writing from Babylon (1 Pet. 5:13). Attempts have been made to link Babylon as figurative of Rome (cf. Rev. 17).²⁴ But there is nothing in the Petrine

passage to hint at its being a figure. If it is a figure, where or what is the Marcus mentioned in the same verse? That Mark was, in fact, Peter's relative (Acts 12:12; Col. 4:10). The first epistle of Peter's is a late missive from around A.D. 66. From Paul's and Peter's writings it thus seems clear that Peter was not the founder of the church there and had **not** been there as late as A.D. 68. Stifler insists:

Again, there is no reason for saying that Peter evangelized the Romans. He was not the apostle to the uncircumcision (Gal. 2:7-8). The sentiment that guided Paul in choosing his fields of labor (Rom. 15:20) precludes the belief that Peter had been at Rome before him. "It is equally clear," says J. B. Hightfoot, "that no other apostle was the founder." How the seed came to be dropped that sprang up in this Roman church remains in obscurity: but it is safe to say that it was the gospel as Paul preached it that gave the Romans their first knowledge of Christ. It is equally safe to say that the gospel could not have been preached until some years after Pentecost....²⁵

Who did start the church in Rome?

Beginnings Of The Church?

The origin of the church in Rome is unknown. There were present on the day of Pentecost "sojourners from Rome" (Acts 2:10) who may have returned with the message of Christ. Aquila and Priscilla had come from Rome, and, according to Romans 16:3, had returned thither. No hint is given in the New Testament that Peter had anything to do with the founding of this church. It seems to have been one that began spontaneously among believers, the majority of whom had probably migrated to Rome from other parts of the world.²⁶

Tenney, above, seems to mention at least three possibilities as to the origin of a congregation of God's people in Rome. The first is a return from Jerusalem of those formerly Rome-based Jews who were converted on Pentecost (Acts 2:10). The problem with this view is that the church at Rome seems to have been greatly Gentile, but perhaps just a few former Jewish converts taught those. In that list of names in Romans 16:3-15 there are a few Jewish names, some Latin, and the majority Greek.²⁷

If Aquila and Priscilla were the "seed bed" of the Roman church, they were former Jews (Acts 18). But the reading in Romans 16:3-5 seems to presuppose other Roman Christians greeting Aquila and Priscilla and some congregation meeting in their house. It is difficult to pinpoint any hint of who established what from such verses.

Perhaps, as Tenney suggests, just ordinary travel (cf. Acts 8:4) caused a "spontaneous" beginning of the congregation. Certainly the Roman church was without apostolic presence (Rom. 1:11).

Perhaps one passage, more than any other, precludes Peter's and Paul's presence in Rome. Paul insisted that he "strived to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build on another man's foundation...For which cause also I have been much hindered in coming to you" (Rom. 15:20,22). If Peter were already in Rome, would Paul's great desire to go there be so urgent (1:11; 15:23)? If Paul had already been there, his statement about being "hindered" is nonsensical (15:22).

Historical evidence indicates that all the apostles were dead before A.D. 70 except John.²⁸ It has been proven above that Peter was not in Rome as late as A.D. 68. Only God really knows, then, how that ancient congregation began.

Was Peter A “Pope”?

From its era of religious polytheism, oracular cults, Sibylline oracles, through Hellenization and attempts by Augustus to restore the old oracles and gods, Rome had long tolerated, even embraced new theologies.²⁹ The state did not dictate religion, but the one thing Rome could not endure was an attack upon her polytheism, which would deprive the gods of the services and offerings that occupied an otherwise idle population.³⁰ Into that society Christianity was born, having a non-earthly King and an intolerance for the idea of many gods (Acts 2; Rom. 1).

To place an “earthly” head of the church in Rome was apostasy **and** resulted in Hellenization of the church’s teaching and a secularization of her organization. There was a Head of the church then, and He is still Head now (Eph. 1:20-23). No earthly leader was needed in the first century, and no earthly leader is needed now (Col. 1:18). Christianity can exist alongside of a Nero or a Hitler or a Clinton, for the church is not political and is commanded, as far as possible, to obey the laws of the land (Rom. 13:1-6; Acts 5:29). However, men do not obey government or God, and such rebellion led to the papacy and the complete apostasy of the church of Christ in Rome.

Several factors account for the rise of the historical episcopate. First, Ignatius was convincing in his teaching that **the** bishop, as successor to the apostles, [following Clement of Alexandria’s lead that the elders succeeded the apostles—which doctrine ignored the fact that elders were “over the flock” even when the apostles lived (Acts 20:28)] was the highest spiritual office.³¹ Instead of elders (bishops) and deacons, the church developed bishops, elders, and deacons, fulfilling Paul’s prophecy of such an apostasy (20:28-32). Second, churches, in order to present a united front against error, developed synodic councils as early as the second century to discuss matters of faith.

The councils led to the churches in a given area investing power in a bishop to settle matters of faith.³²

Third, some of the bishops took over churches in a given metropolitan area, and many local congregations acceded to the bishop's rule. Usually these bishops were the best-educated in the district. A fourth influence was that many second-century writers and defenders of the faith (as Ignatius) were arguing that only the bishop could baptize or offer the Lord's supper.³³ When the full-blown city-bishop of Rome declared himself pope, it was necessary to prove apostolic succession (cf. Leo the Great, 440-461).³⁴ Leo rested his theory on three Bible passages: Matthew 16:18-19; John 21:15-17; Luke 22:31-32. The theory was that Peter was the "rock" or vicar or earthly representative of Christ on earth and that the bishop of Rome was the direct successor of Peter and "consequently enjoyed all the privileges of that great apostle."³⁵ The church of Rome had "apostolic tradition," which claim, it was argued, could not be made by other city-bishops.³⁶

Was Peter a city-bishop and the rock on which Jesus built His church (Matt. 16:18)? No! The **Rock** (*petra* not *petros*, Peter or stone) is Christ (1 Cor. 3:11), and Peter was a "fellow-elder," not a bishop over some metropolitan area (1 Pet. 5:1).³⁷ Peter even commanded that elders serve only the local congregation (5:2) and that elders were never to be "lords over God's heritage" (5:3). Leo the Great would have to prove that Peter was ever in Rome; ever a bishop over the entire city; and ever given the title of the church's foundation, which proof Leo did not have.

Further, Peter was a married man and lived contrary to the Roman Catholic doctrine of celibacy (Matt. 8:14-15; 1 Cor. 9:5). Peter was not infallible in matters of the practice of doctrine, which the pope is said to be (Gal. 2:14). Peter was a "messenger boy" for the church at Jerusalem, which is hardly a task for the "pope" of Rome (Acts 8:14).

The Roman Catholic church teaches that she gave the Bible to the world.³⁸ On the contrary, the “pillar and ground of the truth” is the “mystery of godliness”—that is, Christ (1 Tim. 3:15-16). The Word of God is the seed of the Kingdom not, vice-versa (Luke 8:11). The Bible does not even hint at city bishops, cardinals, or popes. All such are manmade deviations from Divine Truth.

Major Persecutions Of The Church

In spite of efforts to defend the church, Roman persecution was “chronic and persistent.”³⁹ Since Christians would not share in the religious rites associated with the imperial cults, Christians were viewed as traitors hostile to the state.⁴⁰ There were at least ten major persecutions emanating from Rome. Beginning with Nero (ca.. A.D. 64) to the year A.D. 250, there were many **local** persecutions, with the church in Rome suffering the most severe.⁴¹ The more severe, Empire-wide persecutions after A.D. 250 were “determined attempts to extirpate Christianity as a major threat.”⁴²

The **Annals of Tacitus** contain the information best-known by modern Christians that Nero, in an attempt to overcome the rumors that he had ordered certain portions of Rome to be burned, blamed the fire on Christians.⁴³ Tacitus reports that certain Christians were fed to wild beasts, burned at the stake, tortured, all as “circus” events for the populace.⁴⁴

When one reads Romans 1:8 with the above facts in mind, that “their faith was spoken of throughout the whole world,” it is evident that great faith would have been needed to face such horrendous treatment. According to John, Rome was “drunken with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus” (Rev. 17:6). John even pictures the unsaved world as wondering at such activities by ancient Rome (17:8).

Sometimes modern Christians are given to thinking that their times are so evil that it is hard (even “too hard” say some) to live the Christian life. The early faithful died for the cause. Was such “too hard”? (2:10).

The church at Rome did not remain faithful. She apostatized so greatly, that Roman Catholicism evolved. In fact there is a huge lesson in that historical fact for churches of today.

The Church In Rome

A Major Illustration Of The How Of Church Apostasy

Paul knew apostasy would come (Acts 20:26-32; 1 Tim. 4:1-3; 2 Thess. 2:1-8; et al.). The apostle had begged the Roman church:

mark them which cause divisions contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned: and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly: and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple (Rom. 16:17-18).

Would Paul have to beg and warn the church of Christ today? Yes! Too many so-called Christians fight against “calling names,” a thing commanded in Scripture (Rom. 16:17). Too many so-called Christians are changing the church’s organization, worship, and even name for their own devices. There are choirs, soloists, women elders, and preachers, “Community Churches,” celebration worship periods, instruments of music, evangelistic overseers riding herd on God’s appointed elders, and a host of “grace-only,” Holy Spirit-led folks egging on everyone else. Yet, when a faithful Gospel preacher names such heretics,

many Christians (?) fight the preacher rather than the error. These Christians then turn to a modern “clergy” for their “faith” of “tolerance” and “love” and, once more in history, the church apostatizes! For proof of the latter assertion, just look around and start counting those who run to an apostate church when the local preacher and/or eldership stands for the Truth, church discipline, and marking those who cause division!

The heretical doctrines that have arisen out of the apostate Roman church are legion. In A.D. 120 the inane doctrine of “Holy Water” was introduced. In A.D. 157 the doctrine of “Penance” (paying some amount or work for one’s sins) was formalized. This latter teaching led to the doctrine of “Indulgence” (A.D. 1190) which allowed one to pay (financially) for sins ahead of time!

Purgatory became “official” in A.D. 593 and the doctrine was based on a gross misunderstanding of 1 Peter 3:18-20. Catholics believe one can be burned “just for a while” and thus cleansed of this world’s sin in the next world.

In A.D. 666 instrumental music was authorized. (The author, with Revelation 13:18 in mind, has always been amazed at that date!) Kissing the pope’s toe became an official doctrine in A.D. 709, and transubstantiation followed in A.D. 1000. The latter teaching is that the bread and fruit of the vine actually become Christ’s body during communion.

In A.D. 1215 auricular confession as a practice of the church was incorporated and, at the Council of Ravenna in A.D. 1311, sprinkling was legalized as a proper form of baptism. In A.D. 1870, the doctrine of papal infallibility was officially recognized. (One wonders how many mistakes popes made until then.) And in A.D. 1953, Peter’s bones (mentioned above) were “found” in the Basilica on Christmas day.⁴⁶ Just this year, the pope has considered making Mary a co-mediator with Christ!

Obviously, once apostasy begins, it knows no stopping place. If the church of Christ in America does not soon return to a Biblical foundation, she has nothing to which to look forward except some grossly malformed community group with no reason to exist apart from denominational apostasy. May God grant Christians the strength of faith to defend the Gospel and to “contend earnestly for the faith once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3).

Church Members At Rome

There were, evidently, few aristocrats (either patrician or plebeian) in the Roman church (Rom. 16; 1 Cor. 1:26). Many of the best educated in Rome, however, were slaves. But, by the end of the second century, even the imperial family was being reached with the Gospel. (Two cousins of Domitian, Flavius Clemens and his wife, Flavia Domitilla, became Christians!)⁴⁷

Philo mentioned that Augustus had assigned the Jews a large region beyond the Tiber River because the Romans could not tolerate a slave population that would not tolerate Gentiles.⁴⁸ However, the Jews became so numerous that Claudius came to despise them and ordered them out of Rome (Acts 18:2). When the Jews began returning to Rome after Claudius’s death, their synagogues, according to Juvenal, became favorite gathering places for other Romans.⁴⁹

Paul, aware of the Jew-Gentile prejudice, penned the letter to them known as Romans, hoping to alleviate the problem and to secure a hearing for the Gospel (Rom. 15:24-33). Prejudice was (and is) a problem for God’s people.

Conclusion

No apostle started the church in Rome, yet her faith spread throughout the Roman empire (Rom. 1:8). (Churches of Christ with strong members can spread the

faith anywhere.) There was no pope in Rome; there were no cardinals nor a “holy see.”

Yet, from such a faithful beginning and even later physical presence of the apostle Paul, the Roman church began a tremendous fall into apostasy. Will Christians today remember the fall of the Roman church or are they destined to repeat history?

Endnotes

1 **The Holy Bible, King James Version** (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978). All references are to this version unless otherwise stipulated.

2 See S. Angus, “Roman Empire and Christianity,” **International Standard Bible Encyclopedia**, Volume 4, ed. James Orr (Grand Rapids, MI: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1939), p. 2600.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Kenneth Scott Latourette, “The First Five Centuries,” **A History of the Expansion of Christianity**, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978 reprint), p. 8.

7 Angus, p. 2600.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Latourette, “The First Five Centuries,” pp. 10-11.

11 Ibid, p. 8. Latourette draws extensively from Adolf Hamack, **The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries**, trans. and ed. James Moffatt (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1908).

12 Angus, p. 2601.

13 James M. Stifler, **The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary Logical and Historical** (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), p. 11.

14 Kenneth Scott Latourette, **A History of Christianity** (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953), p. 66.

15 Latourette, “The First Five Centuries,” pp. 94-95.

16 Lars P. Qualben, **A History of the Christian Church** (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1973), p. 98.

17 Ibid.

18 Eusebius, "The Preaching of Peter in the City of Rome," **The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus**, ed. Isaac Bayle (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), pp. 63-64.

19 Ibid.

20 Justin Martyr, **Hortatory Address**, p. 28.

21 C. H. Dodd, **The Epistle of Paul to the Romans** (New York: Long and Smith, 1931), pp. xxxv. and 246. See also Latourette, "The First Five Centuries," p. 94.

22 Iranaeus, **Hares III**: 1.

23 Two other statements, one from Eusebius and one from a late second-century writer, Dimpius, cannot be Biblically based. Eusebius insisted that Peter departed from Antioch to Rome based on an erroneous tradition from Acts 12:17 which passage contains the words that Peter went to "another place." However, Ambrosiaster, a second-century writer bragged that the church in Rome was started without ever seeing an apostle. (The latter notes are sourced from class notes under Rex A. Turner, Sr.)

24 Ibid.

25 Stifler, p. 12.

26 Merrill C. Tenney, **New Testament Survey** (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1964), p. 304.

27 Stifler, p. 12.

28 Qualben, p. 48.

29 George H. Allen, "Roman Religion," **International Standard Bible Encyclopaedias**, ed. James Orr (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1939), p. 2621.

30 Ibid.

31 Ignatius, **Epistle to the Church at Tralles**, II-III.

32 Qualben, pp. 90-91.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid, p. 129

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Elders and bishops are biblically the same office. See Acts 20:17,28 and 1 Timothy 3:15. The two terms simply describe differing aspects of the work of an overseer. The church always had a **plurality** of elders in New Testament times (cf. Phil. 1:1).

38 Qualben, **A History of the Christian**, pp. 93-96.

39 Latourette, "The First Five Centuries," p. 84.

40 Ibid, p. 85.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Rex A. Turner, Sr. "Class Notes, Romans" (Alabama Christian School of Religion, 1979).

47 Philo Judaeus, **The Works of Philo**, trans. C. D. Yonge (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1993), p. 774.

48 Latourette, "The First Five Centuries," p. 85.

49 Ibid.

CHAPTER 11

Lessons From The Church At Corinth

Paul Sain

Introduction

P*OWER* (*THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST*) reaches into the lives of thousands on a regular basis as a result of the efforts of this faithful congregation. Thank you, dear brethren. We offer our respect for the fine eldership, your faithful preachers, and diligent workers who make these efforts possible.

I am so thankful for this series of studies. There were congregations of the Lord's people in the first century who walked steadfastly, faithfully, and diligently, seeking to glorify the Father. We can learn ever so much from them. Sadly, there were many problems that plagued the Lord's body in the first century. Even more sadly, these problems continue to bring havoc on the church today.

The apostle Paul is the author of First and Second Corinthians. First Corinthians was one of the longest letters Paul wrote to any of the churches. As he spoke, so he wrote with love and boldness. He powerfully rebuked and condemned sin in the lives of those to whom he wrote. It was evident, though, that he wrote with great love and sincere concern for these whom he loved so greatly.

What Was Corinth Like In The First Century?

It was my treasured opportunity in 1985 to walk the streets of ancient Corinth. As I stood near the ruins, walked

the streets of stone, and viewed the rubble, I attempted to capture what it would have been like to be present when Paul (or other proclaimers of Christianity) powerfully presented the Gospel of Christ.

Ancient Corinth has its roots back to 1500 B.C., according to most historians. We are able to draw from the writings of Polycarp (a bishop of Smyrna), Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Irenaeus, etc., near the apostolic age, as they included citations from Paul's letters to the Corinthians. The first-century city known as Corinth was located on the Grecian peninsula of Peloponnesos. It was an island except for a four-mile-wide stretch of land that connected it to mainland Greece. The city was on a tableland two hundred feet above the sea. To the south, behind the city, was a 2,000-foot-high rock known as the Acroconinthus, which was even more magnificent than the Acropolis of Athens.

The city was given its name by Corinthus around 550 B.C. Corinth quickly became a wealthy and powerful commercial city, due to its strategic location on the Isthmus of Corinth. It had been called "the city of two seas" and "the bridge to Greece." The strip of land between the Gulf of Corinth and the Saronic Gulf was controlled by the city. The two hundred mile journey around Cape Malea, with treacherous storms and dangerous shorelines, made the narrow isthmus of great value. If a ship was too large to be physically transported across the narrow isthmus, mariners would often unload and transport their cargo across the four-mile neck of land, and then load it onto another ship. Smaller ships, still loaded with their cargo, were frequently transported crudely over this four-mile-long strip of land by means of a railroad of rollers.

There were three good harbors which dominated the traffic of both the eastern and western seas. The ancient city of Corinth was served by a port at each end of the isthmus: Lechaemum on the west and Cenchræa on the east. At no point

in the land is it more than fifty miles from the sea. Commercially or militarily, whether traveling east or west, north or south, most would likely pass through Corinth. Jews came in mass to this center of trade because of its natural location for marketing their wares (Acts 18:1-18; Rom. 16:21ff; 1 Cor. 9:20). Many prospered under the rule of the Caesars. Though estimates vary, the general consensus of historians would have the population of ancient Corinth at approximately 500,000 to 600,000.

The Pulpit Commentary (Spence and Exell) states the following:

Jews flocked to it for trade; Phoenicians for commerce; Romans, in order to visit a place so famous and to buy antiquities, genuine and spurious, for the Roman market; men of pleasure, to avail themselves of the immorality for which it soon became infamous. Greeks were attracted in large numbers by the renown of the revived Isthmian games.

If one had visited the city in the first century, they would have found a city of unusual culture for that age. There were many well-known painters in Corinth. The city was famous for the Corinthian order of architecture. Music, song writing, and chorus productions played a major role in this region. The physical city with its architecture and white marble was beautiful on the outside, but underneath it was filthy and evil because of its inhabitants.

The Isthmian games were conducted/celebrated every two years just outside the city on the isthmus toward the Saronic Gulf. They were in honor of the god of the sea, Poseidon. Strict guidelines (especially in preparation and qualification) were required of the participants in these religious games. Monuments, public buildings, and art treasures which existed in Corinth at this time are described by Pausanias.

Idol worship was so prevalent in Corinth at this time. The Greeks believed in hundreds of deities, and most were worshiped in Corinth: Aphrodite, Venus, Poseidon, and others. Many even today have heard of the great temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, which occupied the position atop the Acroconinthus. Over 1,000 religious prostitutes were housed in luxurious quarters at this temple. A modern guide at Corinth said the prostitutes had “follow me” written on their shoe soles so that, when they walked in the sand, men would know who they were and follow them to the temple. It was not uncommon in ancient Corinth for a woman to be married and have a family while also serving as a prostitute.

Eerdmans Expositor’s Bible notes, “While Corinth was a commercial city, it nevertheless prided itself upon its culture, and abounded in studies and workshops, in halls of rhetoric and schools of philosophy.”

If one had visited the city in the first century, he would have certainly viewed greed and treachery in its greatest form, but one would have also viewed a sensual, lustful, lascivious, and wealthy place where pleasure and fulfillment of the flesh were considered priorities. In the first century, if one wished to slander another’s character, he would call him “a Corinthian.” If one had left a spiritual, godly state and became grossly immoral, it often was said he had “Corinthianized.” One of the specific things for which the city is remembered and noted by various historians is “the Corinthian sickness” (venereal disease).

R. C. H. Lenski, in **The Interpretation of St. Paul’s 1 and 2 Epistles to the Corinthians**, states that Corinth was one of the most wicked cities in all of the Roman Empire.

Perversion and sexual obsession was obvious in every direction one might look in ancient Corinth. Satan and his agents were aggressively wielding their destructive forces. The city was known throughout the world at that time as a place of pleasure and fleshly fulfillment. Such was the Corinth the apostle Paul entered while on his missionary journey.

Bill Jackson, in his Commentary on Second Corinthians, p. iv, wrote:

Corinth was a melting pot of many nationalities, cultures, religions, life styles, such as would be found in any large crossroads center. So many of the citizens lived the lascivious life, and we are left to imagine the horror felt by the Christians there.

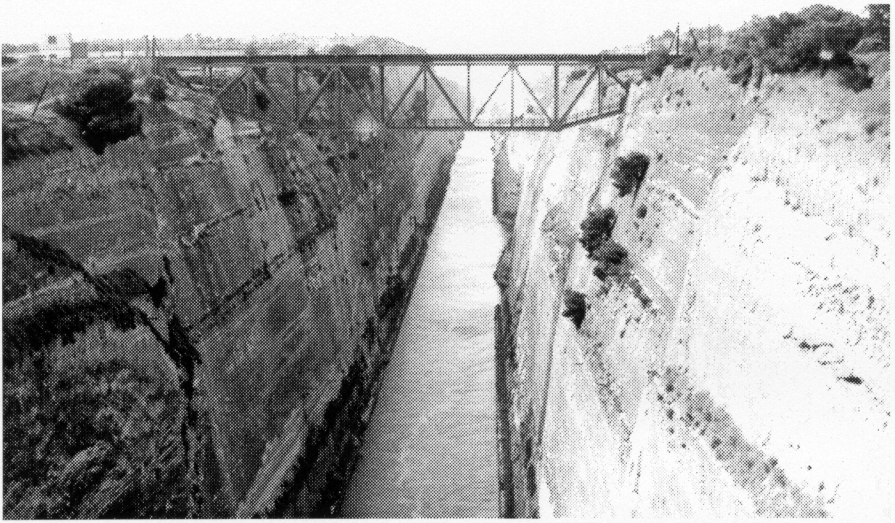
In The Pulpit Commentary we find:

Corinth was the Vanity Fair of the Roman empire...It was into the midst of this mongrel and heterogeneous population of Greek adventurers and Roman bourgeois, with a tainting infusion of Phoenicians, this mass of Jews, ex-soldiers, philosophers, merchants, sailors, freedmen, slaves, tradespeople, hucksters, and agents of every form of vice...that the toilworn Jewish wanderer made his way...But there was one characteristic of heathen life which would come home to him at Corinth with overwhelming force...It was the gross immorality of a city conspicuous for its depravity even amid the depraved cities of a dying heathenism.

There are places today which are known for their vast corruption. Such was the city of Corinth in the first century.

What Is Corinth Like Today?

As are many of the Bible lands today, Corinth has been commercialized for the many tourists which pass through its streets each year. It is still extremely interesting to see what remains of Corinth from the days of the New Testament. The canal, which was completed in the late 1800's, is an awesome site to behold. Pictures which follow are a sampling of those I made in 1985.



Roman Emperor Nero began digging the canal but abandoned the work. Finally, it was completed in 1893. Extremely deep walls, yet the water only approximately 26 feet deep



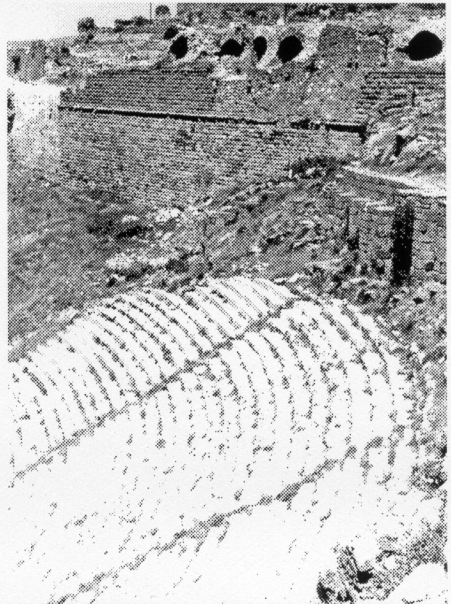
Ships slowly maneuver their way through the canal.

Buildings lie in rubble from centuries of wars, earthquakes and similar tragedies. Tourist guides reflect upon the historical information that intrigues and fascinates.



Once awesome structures being renovated.

Large amphitheatres hewn out of the side of the hill, with acoustical excellence, now reflects centuries of deterioration and ruin.



The First Century Church At Corinth

The powerful persecutor turned proclaimer of the Gospel was evangelistically traveling throughout the land. He was driven from Thessalonica and Berea by the unbelieving Jews. He went to the famed city of Athens in Greece. But the philosophers in Athens held in contempt the doctrine of Christ which Paul taught, as well as his manner of living. Paul decided it would be of little benefit to tarry in Athens. Therefore, he left Athens and came to Corinth (forty-five miles to the east) in about 50-51 A.D. (Acts 18:1-11).

The congregation of the Lord's church at Corinth was established by Paul during his second missionary journey to numerous cities and nations. Few additional details are given concerning the actual establishment of the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 1:14ff; 2:1ff; 3:2,6; 15:1ff).

Paul met Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:2). They were Jews originally from Pontus in northern Asia Minor. They had left Rome because of the emperor who reigned at that time, Claudius:

After these things Paul departed from Athens, and came to Corinth; And found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, lately come from Italy, with his wife Priscilla; (because that Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome:) and came unto them (Acts 18:1-2).

Paul preached Jesus as the Christ, the Son of Jehovah God, in the Jewish synagogue:

And when Silas and Timotheus were come from Macedonia, Paul was pressed in the spirit, and **testified** to the Jews **that Jesus was Christ** (Acts 18:5, emp. mine throughout, PS).

And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I **determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified** (1 Cor. 2:1-2).

He went to the Jews first, but, tragically, they rejected the saving message. He then turned to the Gentiles (Acts 18:6; 13:46). Many Gentiles obeyed the Gospel (18:7-8). Crispus (chief ruler of the synagogue) and his family were converted (18:8; 1 Cor. 1:14). Sosthenes, a ruler of the synagogue (Acts 18:8,17) also obeyed the Truth (18:17). The city treasurer of Corinth, Erastus, also became a Christian—nothing more, nothing less, nothing else (2 Tim. 4:20; Rom. 16:23). These are but a few of the known converts. Some were powerful, well-known individuals. Others were from the lower classes in the pagan culture:

Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers,

nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And **such were some of you**: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God (1 Cor. 6:9-11).

It is valuable to ask what “preaching Christ” includes. Following the example of this apostle of Christ, who spoke by the inspiration of Christ, preaching Christ includes:

1. *Preaching a doctrine inspired of God.* He preached **the** doctrine of Christ which did not come from man; it was not a denominational doctrine (Gal. 1:11-12,15-17). What Paul preached agreed with other inspired men and was received from the Holy Spirit.

Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual (1 Cor. 2:12-13).

He taught the Truth of God, without error or contradiction, which is contrary to denominational confusion (1 Cor. 14:33; 2 Cor. 4:2; 1 Tim. 2:7; 1 Thess. 2:13). This powerful Gospel (Rom. 1:16) was what he preached to all men (1 Cor. 16:1).

2. *Preaching which was founded upon the crucified and raised Son of God, Jesus Christ.* Paul, the promoter of Christianity, preached Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected:

But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:23-24).

Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that **Christ died for our sins** according to the scriptures; And that **he was buried**, and that **he rose again** the third day according to the scriptures (15:1-4).

Paul gloried only in the cross of Christ (Gal. 6:14).

Brethren, this is the Gospel that is urgently needed today. Why? We must help everyone see: that God is a just God (Rom. 3:21-26), understand how horrible sin really is (6:23), comprehend and appreciate what God's Son did for us (Rom. 5:8; John 12:32), realize the value of the church for which Christ died (Acts 20:28; Eph. 5:23-33), and attempt to appreciate the great love of God for all mankind (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8). In preaching Christ crucified, Paul taught the Corinthians these facts. Likewise, today, we can accomplish the same.

Preaching must include preaching Christ as the "precious" Lamb of God (1 Pet. 2:7), if it is to please our Father. We should consider Him "precious" because He is our perfect example (1 Pet. 2:21; Heb. 7:25-26), because He paid the price for redemption for us by His shed blood (Titus 2:14; Gal. 1:4; 1 Pet. 1:18-19; Heb. 9:22), and because He is our hope and assurance of life beyond the grave (1 John 3:2; 1 Pet. 1:3).

3. *Preaching which demanded full obedience to the will of God.* Paul told the Thessalonian brethren that only those who know and obey the Lord will be saved (2 Thess. 1:7-9). In Hebrews 5:8-9, the inspired writer spoke of obedience: “Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him.”

Obedience to the Gospel plan of salvation was clearly declared (John 8:24; Luke 13:3; Matt. 10:32-33; Mark 16:16; 1 Cor. 12:13), which put one in “the” body of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23; 4:4), the church He purchased with His blood (Acts 20:28).

Paul declared that the grace of God is found in the Gospel (20:24). One is saved by obeying Christ’s law in the Gospel—the Gospel Paul taught in Corinth, whether in the synagogue or in individual homes (18:1ff; Gal. 6:2; 5:7).

4. *Preaching which condemned sin and encouraged righteousness.* Throughout Paul’s preaching life, he did not shy from boldly “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). He spoke what was needed and not necessarily what the people wanted. He did not shun to declare the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27).

It was very possibly some of the same Greeks to whom Paul addressed the following bold words:

Being filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity; whisperers, Backbiters, haters of God, despiteful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, Without understanding, covenant-breakers, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful: Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which

commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them (Rom. 1:29-32).

This loving preacher taught that sin separates one from God and will result in the loss of heaven (Rom. 6:5-7,11-13; Gal. 5:19-21).

Paul strongly demanded righteousness:

For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: **walk as children of light**: (For the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth;) Proving what is acceptable unto the Lord. And **have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness**, but rather reprove them (Eph. 5:8-11).

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law. And **they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh** with the affections and lusts. If we live in the Spirit, **let us also walk in the Spirit** (Gal. 5:22-25).

Paul acknowledged the former wicked and sensual lives of many of these brethren. He knew the tragedy it would be if they returned to such sin. He knew a sinful life was not consistent with the Christian life (Rom. 6:15). He encouraged them not to sin. He exhorted them to withdraw themselves from those who were living in sin (1 Cor. 5:1ff). He taught that evil companions may corrupt and destroy (15:33). Paul taught that faithful followers of God must live a pure life:

Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived:

neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God (6:9-11).

He exhorted the brethren to set their affections on things above (Col. 3:1-5). He pleaded with Christians to think on things pure, just, holy, etc. (Phil. 4:8). He urged all to follow holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord (Heb. 12:14).

5. *Preaching which promotes true unity as taught by our Lord, not union as advocated by man.* Jesus prayed for unity (John 17:10-11). Paul condemned division which existed in the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 1:10ff). But he did not advocate unity at any cost, but, rather, unity as Christ demands (Eph. 4:3-6). All division is not condemned in the Holy Scriptures (1 Cor. 5:1-11). All unity is not desired according to the Scriptures (Eph. 5:11; 2 Cor. 6:17).

6. *Preaching which promises the faithful a heavenly home.* Paul did not promise heaven to any and all, regardless of their faith and faithfulness. The Lord's Gospel, which Paul declared, promised an eternal reward in heaven **only** to those who were faithful to the end (Matt. 10:22) and faithful unto death (Rev. 2:10b).

Paul preached that it was not only possible to fall from grace, but he knew that some had already done so (Gal. 4:11; 5:1-4). In fact, Paul personally pressed toward the mark of the prize, striving and diligently endeavoring not to become a castaway himself:

I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore,

as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you. Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing (Phil. 3:14-16).

But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway (1 Cor. 9:27).

It is interesting to note the quantity of people who are enumerated in the New Testament in connection with the church at Corinth: Aquila and Priscilla, Silas, Timothy, Titus, Apollos, Tertius, Crispus, Gaius, Titus, Justus, Chloe, Erastus, and others. These converts ran the gamut from rulers to the lower classes.

There was great opposition and persecution at that time, and Paul knew the temper and disposition of the Gentiles there. He knew he was in an extremely explosive situation. Paul considered leaving (Acts 18:9; 1 Cor. 2:3-5), but God intervened. In a vision, the Almighty told him not to be fearful and to keep on speaking (Acts 18:9-10). Paul remained in Corinth, preaching Jesus Christ, for eighteen months (18:11). During this time, Paul supported himself by making tents (18:3) with Priscilla and Aquila. While the Corinthian converts did not support him (1 Cor. 9:12,15; 2 Cor. 11:8), he did receive some support from the saints at Macedonia (2 Cor. 11:9). Timothy and Titus brought these funds (Acts 18:5).

When Paul left Corinth, various problems arose which disrupted the church. He was at Ephesus at the time (during his three-year work there). Unfavorable news came concerning the congregation of the Lord's people at Corinth. The source of the news was the household of Chloe (1 Cor. 1:11) and other friends (Stephanas, Fortunatus, and

Achaicus (16:17). The church also wrote him a letter asking him to provide answers concerning marriage and other matters (7:1). Paul also was aware of Judaizing teachers who were casting doubt upon his apostleship. It is not difficult to see how problems and divisions would occur when we consider the makeup of this body. Because it was comprised of both Jew and Gentile (Acts 18:1-17), there were differences concerning meats, rules and regulations (1 Cor. 9:19-22). Certainly, there would be problems to resolve concerning eating with unbelievers and eating in pagan temples.

It is likewise easy to see how the Jews might align themselves with Peter (a Jew and one of the Lord's original apostles). Gentiles would likely align themselves with the orator Apollos.

Some of the specific problems which faced the church at Corinth included division (1 Cor. 1:10ff), immorality (5:1-10), profaning the Lord's Supper, and false doctrines.

Burton Coffman's **Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians** offers the following, practical approximation of the order of events which led to Paul's writing both First and Second Corinthians:

1. Paul founded the Corinthian church (Acts 18:1-18).
2. Paul wrote a letter to them which was lost (1 Cor. 5:9).
3. The Corinthians wrote Paul a letter requesting information; and about the same time, Paul received disturbing news from "the household of Chloe."
4. Paul replied in the letter of 1 Corinthians.
5. Paul made an unrecorded visit to Corinth.
6. Paul's anxiety for the church was so great that he could not wait in Troas for Titus, but hurried on to Macedonia.
7. In Macedonia, Paul met Titus and learned from him that the Corinthians had responded

to his first epistle. All was well in Corinth. In response to the good news, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians.

Strengths Of The Church At Corinth

Though we emphasize the things which we term as “strengths,” let us add that obviously these areas were not met to perfection. The Divine side of the church has been one without flaw. The human side has been, and will always be, one of striving toward, but never reaching, error-free action. But, with this in mind, we note the following strengths of the church at Corinth:

1. *They believed in Jesus Christ as the true Son of God.* They had looked for the Messiah. They knew Jesus Christ was the true and living Son of God. As Simon Peter (and the eleven) preached on the day of Pentecost, “this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel” (Acts 2:16). They knew this was that!

They accepted the powerful Truth of God and modified their lives accordingly. Many of the Christians in the church at Corinth had previously been grossly involved in sin (1 Cor. 6:9-11). God can take a sinner, wherever he is, and wash him clean. Paul referred to himself as the “chief of sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15), but he became a bold, powerful, and effective instrument of God.

2. *They had the right standard of authority to govern them.* Paul preached the powerful Word of God (Rom. 1:16), the “word of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18-19). It is inspired (2 Tim. 3:16-17), the perfect Law (Jas. 1:25), once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3). The Word must be handled in the right way (2 Cor. 4:2).

Briefly note with me that it was not a creed book, catechism, manual, discipline book, etc., but it was **the** Word of God which directed them. Paul did not exhort them to

follow the way that made them feel good or the way that was most popular. They were exhorted to follow Christ, “the way” (John 14:6).

3. They had been “added” to the church which began at the right time, the right place, by the right builder. They were not added to a denomination, a church built and maintained by man. They were added to the church which we read about in the Bible, the church for which Christ died (Acts 2:47; 20:28).

Prophecies of long ago had specified when, where, and who would build the church in which salvation would be found (Isa. 2:2-3; Joel 2:28; Dan. 2:44). The church which began on Pentecost, in Jerusalem, in the days of the kings, was built by Jesus Christ (Matt. 16:18; Mark 9:1; Luke 24:46-47). Denominations are built by the wrong person, at the wrong time, and at the wrong place. These things are of utmost importance. They determine if the body, the church of which we are a member, is the Lord’s or man’s. If it be of man, it does not have the power to save.

4. They taught the plan of salvation which our Lord authorized. Those in the first century were told to **believe** in Christ as the true and living Son of God (John 8:24; Mark 16:16; Heb. 11:6). They were commanded to **repent** (Acts 17:30) and, unless they did so, they would perish (Luke 13:3). They were further instructed to **confess** Christ as the Son of God (Matt. 10:32-33; Rom. 10:9-10). Then, to put one into Christ, they were commanded to be **immersed** for the remission of their sins (Acts 2:38; 8:35ff; 22:16; 1 Peter 3:21). The Lord would then add them to the body, the church (Acts 2:47; Eph. 1:22-23; 4:4). The church at Corinth began with this teaching and requirements, as did all congregations throughout the land in the first century and continuing until today.

5. They worshiped in the way pleasing to Almighty God. Though they did not have a “church

building,” it is undeniable that they worshiped according to the desire of God. They **sang** praises in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. They **taught** the will of God one to another. They **prayed** to God, offering their requests and thanksgivings. They **gave** of their physical blessings, as they were prospered, and sometimes beyond. They **partook** of the Lord’s Supper, upon the first day of the week. These actions (ingredients) must be our actions today if our worship is to be acceptable (John 4:23-24).

6. *They learned from Paul’s letter (1 Corinthians) and changed their ways.* It is evident from the book of 2 Corinthians that these brethren were sincere and eagerly made adjustments in their lives. They heard and respected the wise counsel (inspired words) of the apostle Paul.

Apollos was a mighty man, eloquent, and already knowledgeable in the doctrine of Christ. But he still needed to be taught in connection with the baptism of John versus the baptism for the remission of sins. One of the greatest compliments to be spoken of Apollos was that he was teachable. He was not arrogant, haughty, nor a know-it-all. He was willing to listen and learn from Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:24-26).

These are things which we know are “right” with the church. They are likewise some of the wonderful truths and facts we enjoy today as God’s people.

Weaknesses Of The Church At Corinth

Let us note a few areas in which the church at Corinth were “bad examples”:

1. *They were not united.* Some were polarizing to Apollos, others Cephas, yet others Paul. Instead of exalting Jesus Christ and forgetting the human instrumentality of the work of our Lord, they were dividing and tearing asunder the precious body of Christ. The apostle Paul dealt emphatically with this matter (1 Cor. 1:10ff).

2. *They tolerated some sin, not maintaining the purity of the bride of Christ.* While it is true that all sin (Rom. 3:23), it is also true that, if we allow sin to continue in our lives knowingly, without confessing and forsaking that sin, we will be lost (Heb. 6:4-6; 10:26ff). Some of the brethren at Corinth were accepting sin in the lives of their brethren, without rebuking them and helping them get out of the sinful condition (1 Cor. 5:1ff).

Christ presented the church a glorious, spotless body (Eph. 5:23-33). He expects us to maintain her purity (Jas. 1:27; 4:4) by following His instructions in regard to discipline (2 Thess. 3:6). The brethren at Corinth needed further instruction and admonition on these matters, which Paul gave them.

The truth about sin is:

All have sinned (Rom. 3:23).

Satan is the father of sin (John 8:44).

Sin is not inherited (Ezek. 18:20).

Sin is transgression of law (1 John 3:4).

Sin is unrighteousness (5:17).

Sin is not doing good (Jas. 4:17)

That which is not of faith is sin (Rom. 14:23).

Sin separates us from God (Isa. 59:1-2).

Sin makes one captive (Rom. 7:23-25).

Sin brings destruction (2 Thess. 1:7-9).

Sin brings reproach (Prov. 14:34).

Sin enslaves us (Rom. 1:21-32).

The wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23).

To blaspheme the Holy Spirit is unpardonable sin (Matt. 12:31).

No sin is in heaven (Rev. 22:17ff).

We must not allow Satan and the world to convince us that sin in any form is acceptable and thus will not result in consequences.

3. *Some rejected the Truth, even in spite of the evidence.* Paul was a learned, talented, and persuasive proclaimer of the Truth. He presented the “ungetoverable” evidence. But some rejected it. Why would such happen? Why does such happen today? Some excuses which could be offered would include: (1) They considered his commands/requirements hard and too demanding (Matt. 5:31-32,43-48; John 6:66). (2) They loved their traditions and former ways (Matt. 15:3-9). (3) They wanted the praise of the world instead of the praise of God (John 12:42-43; Matt. 6:1-8). (4) They refused to forsake their sinful ways (John 8:12; 1 John 2:15-17; Jas. 4:4). (5) They considered the preaching of Christ to be foolishness (1 Cor. 1:23).

4. *Some desired to remain in their ignorant and wicked ways.* The church at Corinth was comprised of “babes” in Christ (1 Peter 2:2). They needed to grow in knowledge and Christian virtues (2 Peter 1:5ff).

Foolishly, some desired to return to their sinful ways, continuing in their former habits and lifestyles. If we are to live acceptably in God’s sight, we must come out from among the world of sin (2 Cor. 6:17) and have no fellowship with darkness (Eph. 5:11). We must recognize we are merely passing through this land, as travelers, headed to a better home (1 Peter 2:11; Rev. 21:1ff).

The former law, the Law of Moses, was contrary to them and thus was nailed to the cross of Christ (Gal. 3:12; Col. 2:14; Heb. 10:1-4). Why would they possibly desire to continue in that way, if they understood at all the law of Christ as the perfect law of liberty (Jas. 1:21-27).

5. *Marriage, divorce and remarriage was a problem then as it is today*(1 Cor. 7:1-40). It was a major controversy at Corinth in view of their previous lives of sinful practices. Whoredom was a common practice. Prostitution was glorified in their culture. Thus, to hear that God desired and demanded one man and one woman,

until death they do part (Matt. 19:3-9), was a revolutionary matter.

Paul advised, in view of the severe persecution upon God's people, that it was better to remain unmarried, if possible (1 Cor. 7:25ff).

Of particular interest was the command how a believing wife was to treat an unbelieving husband. Paul said she was not to leave her husband (7:10-11).

6. *Brothers in the church going to law over matters which should be resolved otherwise* (6:1-20). Spiritually mature men should decide matters of right and wrong conduct, worship, etc., in the church (6:5-6). The judgment of the spiritual leaders should be respected and accepted (6:7-8). Paul also discusses the matter of a brother going to law with a brother (6:9-12).

7. *Public worship—abuses and misuses*. Some Corinthian sisters were disrobing, and the communion was turned into a common meal and a festival, instead of a time of solemn celebration and self-examination. They were spiritually sick and dead (11:30).

Paul also addresses the relationship between Jehovah, Jesus, men, and women. He declares Jehovah as the head of Jesus, and man is the head of the woman (11:3). It is wrong to bring shame and dishonor to your head, as a woman undressed in public brings shame to her husband.

8. *Contention over spiritual gifts*. From Paul's writings about this matter, we learn that spiritual gifts can be understood (12:1). Nine spiritual gifts are specified (12:4-11). He tells them that the spiritual gifts will cease when the perfect (complete) will of God is revealed (13:9-13). In chapter 14, he gives further instructions concerning the use and abuse of spiritual gifts.

9. *Mistaken view of the resurrection*. 1 Corinthians 15:1-58 teaches the truth concerning false views which were held by some brethren at Corinth. Jesus'

resurrection proves Him to be the Son of God (15:1-11). This was just one additional matter that needed further instruction by the inspired apostle.

Central Messages Of Paul's Epistles To The Corinthians

We learn so much from these two books, which contain twenty-nine chapters. The basic messages include the following (taken from **Know Your Bible** by the beloved Frank Dunn):

1. *The church exists in the world but is not of the world.*

2. *Heavenly foolishness is superior to earthly wisdom.*

3. *Church discipline is essential to maintaining the purity of the body of Christ.*

4. *The faithful follower of Christ will be triumphant over death.*

5. *Separation from the world is essential.* Though they had been worldly, now they must be and live spiritual. They had allowed their fleshly passions to run wild previously, but now they must contain, restrain and live godly and righteously. There is a difference now. They are not of the world. Their home (affections) is above (Col. 3). They are now to lay up treasures above (Matt. 6:19-21). They must not love the world nor the things of the world (1 John 2:15-17). They are not to be "friends" with the world, or they become enemies of God (Jas. 4:4). They are mere pilgrims and sojourners in this land (1 Peter 2:11). One day, they will realize their due reward and receive a mansion, a heavenly home (John 14:1-3; Rev. 21:1ff).

A Study Of The Church At Corinth Will Help The Church Today

Not only were the brethren at Corinth human, and certainly guilty of making mistakes, but they were "babes"

who needed the nourishment of milk but were commanded to grow toward receiving meat. Paul taught them the Gospel and continued teaching them the Gospel. Compare the great commission of our Lord found in Matthew 28:18-20. He commanded that we teach, baptize, and then continue teaching.

Every congregation of which I have known has had strengths and weaknesses. May God allow us the time to grow, mature, go on to perfection, abound in every grace, press toward the mark of the prize—keeping our eyes on the Saviour—that one day we may enjoy the endless ages with the faithful from the church which met at Corinth in the first century.

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CHAPTER 12

Lessons From The Church At Pergamum

Wayne Jones

Introduction

THAT THOU MAYEST WALK in the way of good men, and keep the paths of the righteous” (Prov. 2:20). Learning and leading by example is a principle which prevails in Scripture. From the Old Testament we are aware of many who walked in these paths of righteousness for us to follow. Men such as Abel, Noah, Abraham and Moses, through their faith in, and dedication to, God, paved a road which we can journey. The Spirit recognized the vitality of these examples and included them for our study and meditation in Hebrews 11.

From the pages of the New Testament we are aware of even more examples worthy of our following. Men such as Peter, Paul, Barnabas and Timothy have left godly examples. However, we need to remember that these men were not perfect. We must only follow them, wherein they followed Christ (1 Cor. 11:1). This is done because His is the greatest example of all. In describing His perfect example, notice what was written: “For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). Peter further stated of the one “who did no sin,” that He “suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps” (1 Pet. 2:21).

Not only are we given charge to heed the examples of godly individuals, we are also given the examples of numerous congregations of the first century church. While these examples are often marred with trouble, contention, and misunderstanding of Truth, they remain a vital part of study in the area of influence. Do you suppose we could ever find an example of a perfect congregation? Certainly this is not possible. It is possible, however, to follow the example of a godly assembly wherein they followed Christ. We must learn from their strengths and refrain from their weaknesses.

It is with this in mind that we often consider the second and third chapters of the Revelation. Contained within these chapters are the letters to seven churches in Asia Minor. They are important for our study because “each one is from Christ...each one contains either words of commendation or censure...each one is encouraged to overcome. Each one is offered a reward for overcoming.”¹

The subject for this hour is taken from the example of the saints at Pergamum. Pergamum is only mentioned twice in Scripture (Rev. 1:11; 2:12). The King James Version renders its name “Pergamos” on both occasions, but the American Standard Version interprets it as “Pergamum.” It seems that the later is more widely accepted.² Regardless of the spelling or pronunciation of its name, those who assembled at this place deserve our attention. Their example is recorded for us in Revelation 2:12-17. We will direct our study of their given example in four divisions. We will notice the (1) condition of the city, (2) the commitment of the faithful, (3) the compromise of Truth, and (4) the call to repentance.

The Condition Of The City

The location of Pergamum was not situated on the major trade routes like the city of Ephesus; therefore, it

lacked commercial greatness. It was, however, located 30 miles north of Smyrna and inland from the sea about 15 miles.³ It was found near the entrance to a fertile Caicus River valley. Small vessels were able to navigate from the river to the sea without much problem: “Lacking the commercial greatness of some of its rivals, it more than compensated for it by being a capital city and a metropolis of culture.”⁴

By the time that John penned these words (Rev. 2:12-17), Pergamum had been a “capital” city for nearly 300 years.⁵ Upon the breakup of Alexander the Great’s kingdom, it functioned as the capital of the Seleucid kingdom beginning in 282 B.C.⁶ Pergamum served as the capital city of the Attalid Kingdom from 231-133 B.C. It was willed to the Romans by King Attalus III and quickly became the royal city of Asia. It served as the political capital of its province for over two centuries.⁷ It retained this prestigious honor until A.D. 130. Truly, Pergamum was a center for political activity during the writing of the Revelation.

The city also prided itself in the library it possessed. It is said to have contained more than 200,000 books and was the largest library outside of Alexandria in Egypt.⁸ In order to upgrade the library of Pergamum, Eumenes (king of Pergamum from 197-159 B.C.) bribed the librarian in Alexandria to come and work in Pergamum. Outraged by these events and the loss of his librarian, Ptolemy (king of Egypt) imprisoned the librarian and refused to send Eumenes any more papyrus. With the source of writing materials now cut off, the scholars of Pergamum decided to try tanning sheepskins for writing upon. The product proved to be far better for its purpose than the papyrus. It became known as the Pergamene sheet or parchment. Once this discovery was made, the library grew to the above-mentioned size. In fact, it became so large that it was said

to have been presented as a gift from Mark Anthony to Cleopatra.⁹

Not only was the city known for its political prestige and its large library, but it was also considered by many to be the center of religious activity. Within this city of rich history and political importance much idol worship took place—so much idol worship that Christ would refer to this place as the seat of Satan and the wicked one’s dwelling place (Rev. 2:13). Marlin wrote, “Pergamum was of all things a religious center, a pantheon of false deities.”¹⁰ To realize the religious mindset and environment in which these Christians lived, we will consider a few of the false deities which they worshiped.

First, Pergamum was well-known for its worship of Asclepius, who was referred to as “Asclepius the Savior.”¹¹ He was honored as the god of medicine and of healing, and he was worshiped under the image of a serpent. Some suggest this to be the reason for the references to Pergamum being Satan’s dwelling place. The priests of Asclepius would work together with the doctors, and his temple has been referred to as “the hospital.”¹² Brother Deaver wrote the following: “Sick people would spend the night in the temple with the tame snakes crawling around. The touch of a snake was supposed to be the healing touch of the god.”¹³ Born in Pergamum was Galen, one of the most famous physicians in all the world. Associated with the temple were both medical awards and a medical school.

Second, Pergamum was known for its worship of the gods Zeus and Athena. An altar to Zeus was built in celebration of victory over the Gauls in 240 B.C. It stood about 40 feet tall on a rocky ledge. It signified the victory of the Greeks over the gods of barbarians. The temple of Zeus stood opposite the temple of Athena. This temple was built 800 feet up on the side of a hill.¹⁴ Needless to say, anyone visiting this great city would notice the temples of Zeus and Athena upon arrival.

Third, Pergamum was known for the emperor worship which was prevalent within its borders. This is another reason many suggest that Christ refers to this city as the seat and dwelling place of Satan: “Official Roman or emperor worship was far more political than religious, and in the time of Domitian it was made a test of loyalty to the state.”¹⁵ The Romans used this worship to keep a tight reign on its provinces. Each year they were commanded to burn a pinch of incense and repeat “Caesar is Lord”: “It was in this religious rite that provided Rome with that sense of unity that bound her together.”¹⁶ Considering their rich history and prevalent immorality and idolatry, we then become more aware of the city’s condition. Consider now for a few moments the Divine commendation of commitment.

The Commendation Of Commitment (Rev. 2:12-13)

Christ’s commendation of the faithful in Pergamum begins with a declaration of authority. The Romans considered the emperor to be supreme and the state to be in control. Within the city was the statue to a Greek god who was given glory for their ancient defeat of the Gauls. Living among all these influences, they needed to know that it was Christ who “hath the sharp sword with two edges.” Living in a society where credit and authority were given to gods that were not deserving of such, Christians in Pergamum could rest assured in the One True God of Heaven and the authority of His Sword (Eph. 6:17; cf. Heb. 4:12). You and I live in a society which seeks its authority in numerous places and gives its glory to “gods” of its own choosing. We, too, can rest assured in the fact that we are serving and giving the glory to the One Who holds the twoedged Sword!

Notice two things which Christ says that He knows about them. First, He knew their works. Their work of faithfulness in a time of trouble was not appreciated by the Roman government or the followers of Zeus and Athena, but it was known before the slain Savior. How beautiful is that thought! What comfort this must have given! We may become discouraged by the lack of appreciation of our community, families and even fellow church members, but, if we are about our Father's work from the correct motivation, we can take comfort in the fact that Christ knows our work.

Second, He knew where they dwelt. He was aware of the Satanic atmosphere of Pergamum. He was aware of the idolatry and immorality that existed therein. It was knowing these two things about the city (and the saints) that brought forth this commendation.

The fact that they had faced adversity, coupled with the idea that they had remained faithful and kept themselves pure, brought forth a Divine commendation. They had taken the words of Paul to heart and lived them:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God (Rom. 12:1-2).

Again it seems that they had fulfilled the admonition of James. He wrote: "Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God" (Jas. 4:4). These saints in Pergamum, living

in the dwelling place of Satan, understood their call of separation (2 Cor. 6:17), steadfastness (1 Cor. 15:58), and sanctification (6:11). They took seriously this calling and determined to remain loyal to God and to keep their lives pure.

Their faithfulness was seen in the fact that they had not denied the name of Christ and that they had kept the faith. Holding fast His name would suggest that they had upheld Christ's "deity, authority, and Lordship."¹⁷ "The faith" that those in Pergamum had not denied was the faith of Ephesians 4:5, and the faith once delivered according to Jude 3. It was the system of faith, the Gospel.¹⁸

Keep in mind that they remained faithful to His name and faith even when one among them was killed for doing the same. These were men and women who looked at Satan (and his warning of death) without hesitation and fear. They truly understood with faithfulness, in the face of death, that a crown of life would one day be theirs (Rev. 2:10). Antipas and his death could have been a cause of fear and failure. However, they realized the beatitude of Revelation 14:13: "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord."

While there are no altars to Zeus and Athena or emperor worship in our communities, we also live in Satan's dwelling place. He is the prince of darkness and of this world (Eph. 6:12; 2 Cor. 4:4). His power and influence are seen all around us. From the stranglehold he seems to have on our school systems (through the removal of God and the supporting of evolution and humanism) to the immorality and pornography of television, movies and music, "Satan's seat" has now become our country. Into what was once a God-fearing nation, Satan has implemented a new slogan: "If you don't want it, kill it; if it feels good do it; if you don't like it, divorce it; if you can't handle it, drug it."¹⁹ When a country, on one hand, will

view abortion and homosexuality as choice and lifestyle rather than vulgarity and sin, and, on the other, regard prayer and Scripture as enemies of society, Satan has taken root and taken control!

Brethren, we have a charge and responsibility to remain faithful in such a place. We must hold fast the authority and faith of the Savior, Christ Jesus. While we may never see a person die for holding to such principles, we may see a person's name and reputation torn apart and mocked before all when he or she decides to repel the advances of the wicked one and hold fast to the faith!

Let us use such situations as a motivation of faithfulness rather than a reason to recant our Lord and His Way. We maintain faithfulness to Him because we know He is faithful. Peter wrote: "Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator" (1 Pet. 4:19). When we maintain our commitment to Him, we, too, will receive a Divine commendation and Divine reward:

For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing (2 Tim 4:6-8).

The Condemnation Of Compromise (Rev. 2:14-15)

Despite the number of those who had not denied the name of Christ, there was something which needed reproving. There seemed to be those in Pergamum who

had begun to tolerate false teaching. In essence, they had begun to compromise the Truth. It must be understood that if we tolerate erroneous teaching and those teaching such, we do nothing less than compromise the Truth of God! We can term it ignoring or overlooking, but it is nothing other than compromise. The Savior reveals two particular false teachings of which they were being tolerant:

But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate (Rev. 2:14-15).

It seems that the “doctrine of Balaam” did not have reference to the actual name of the doctrine or its proponents but rather that its teachings and effects were similar to those of Balaam. The account of those events is recorded in Numbers 22-24. Balaam was sought by the Moabite King, Balak, to curse the people of God. When God would not allow such to take place, Balaam devised another plan through which the Israelites would sin. This evil plan was motivated by a love for money and riches. Balaam suggested that Balak seduce and entice the men of Israel with pretty Moabite women. Balaam figured that, under the “control” of lust, these men would then join in the pagan practices of the Moabites. Brethren, many a man’s integrity and honesty have been offered to the god of greed. Likewise, many a man’s reputation and faithfulness have been offered to the god of lust and passion.

The teaching of Balaam’s doctrine can be summarized under three headings. (1) He instructed Balak

to cast a stumblingblock before the nation of Israel. "A 'stumblingblock,' from *skandalon*, indicates the part of a trap on which the bait is placed, which when disturbed, causes the trap to spring, ensnaring the victim."²⁰ If taken, this bait would cause one's soul to be in danger of death! (2) Through such a casting, he encouraged those separated to eat those things offered to idols. The "eating" involved much more than simply eating the meat as discussed by Paul (1 Cor. 8-10). It also involved the actual participation in idol worship. (3) Fornication was often involved in the worship of false deities. It was often a part of the various acts of pagan worship. Balaam's doctrine led Israel to do all three of these things.

Likewise, those in the time of the Revelation were laying the trap that would later cause others to stumble in the area of idol worship and fornication. Perhaps, in an attempt to appease the pressures surrounding them or to gain acceptance by their peers, many began to compromise Truth. Perhaps they, like unto Balaam, sought earthly riches and rewards that those of such practices could offer.

Let it be remembered that Truth has been (and is) compromised for the same reasons today. Preachers and elders often fear the disapproval of peers and associates in and out of the church of Christ. Motivated by this fear, they neglect to preach the whole "counsel of God" or they water it down to the point that it is no more than denominational drivel. Others have felt the pressures of those around and refused to fight, choosing to compromise doctrine rather than to contend for the faith. Even others have sought after the money, fame and popularity that come with compromise and error. In doing such, many of our day have set the bait that has ensnared many.

Further it is stated that some in Pergamum had become tolerant of those who held the doctrine of the Nicolaitans. Although many contend that the two doctrines

were one and the same, it seems that Christ made a difference in the two: “In all probability they were a sensual group who believed, taught and practiced a licentious lifestyle.”²¹ It was likely that they taught that one freed by the Gospel was at liberty to fulfill fleshly desires and wants without regard for spiritual status. Regardless of their exact teachings, we know from our text that God hated their doctrine. Thus, the teaching of such was destructive to the soul.

This letter was not only aimed at those teaching such erroneous doctrines, but also at those who tolerated such. Those who had not denied the name of Christ in Pergamum needed to take seriously their part in stopping the mouths of these false teachers. Apparently, they lacked the courage or will to practice church discipline. They lacked the courage or the will to mark and avoid those causing strife and division. They lacked the courage or the will to rebuke before all those who sinned. In fact, they seemed to suffer from the same thing many elderships suffer from today—a lack of courage to begin, or confidence in the Word to continue, in the area of church discipline. Friends, we will not get rid of the false teaching and its effects until we implement God’s plan for extermination—discipline!

The Call To Change (Rev. 2:16-17)

The call is sent forth to the teachers of such doctrines along with those endorsing such by their silence. The call is for a change—to repent. This return must be motivated by godly sorrow. It must reveal a change of mind and result in a change of action. It was not possible to please God in the present condition because iniquity had separated them from the Father. Thus, they were called and commissioned to repent of sin and come back to God. This call is recorded in firm language so as to get the point across. If refused,

this call included a punishment, but if accepted this call contained a reward.

Consider first the punishment: “Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth” (Rev. 2:16). The same Word which was the power of God to save (Rom. 1:16) was the power of Christ to fight against these false doctrines and those who would not oppose them:

As Balaam had been slain by the sword of those whom he sought to curse (Num. 31:8), so these would be executed by Him whom they could make a curse by reducing His teaching to the status of philosophy or carnal religion.²²

Second, consider the reward for heeding the repentance call. Those returning would be given “hidden manna.” This, no doubt, had reference to manna given from God’s hand to the children of Israel during their wilderness wandering: “Kept either within or before the ark of the covenant it was hidden from view.”²³ While idol worship offered the enjoyment of physical food, the Savior offers spiritual food. The Bread of Life is offered here. It was hidden from those who did not want to see it or partake of it, but it would be given to all if they would only repent and turn.

Those returning would also be given a white stone. Some have suggested that this stone represents the “vote of innocence.”²⁴ It has also been stated that in ancient trials acquittals were revealed by dropping a white pebble into an urn. However, the dropping of a black pebble meant guilty.²⁵ Thus, those who turn from error and reconcile themselves to Christ will be forgiven: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Those

teaching error, and those tolerating it, could find forgiveness in God's "second law of pardon." Written upon this stone of acquittal was a new name. Since a man's name represents all that he is (or all that he is not), this new name would express the beautiful relationship with the Carrier of the Sword.²⁶ With no man knowing the name, the true importance of it cannot be measured nor can it be seen but only by those who wear it. With the promise of a white, innocent stone and a new, clean name given to those who repent of such compromise and false teaching, all who heard should have been quick and ready to repent!

Conclusion

As the Christ urges, let all who have ears "hear what the Spirit saith." To those in this wicked and ungodly world who have not denied the name of Christ, we thank you. May we strive to be like those in Pergamum, the dwelling place of Satan, who maintained a faithfulness to the cause and faith of Christ: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15:58).

To those teaching those things which are a reproach and stumblingblock unto the people of God, repent! Turn, we beg, from a heart of rebellion and self-will: "Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine" (2 Tim. 4:2). Uphold the integrity and importance of Scripture.

To those endorsing (through silence or compromise) the teaching of error, repent also: "And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them" (Eph. 5:11), and "If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds" (2 John 10-11). Return,

please, to a love and concern for truth without regard for popularity or power.

May the example of the saints in Pergamum be studied, understood, and utilized so that we may all receive and uphold the new, precious name given of the Savior.

Endnotes

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- 2 J. T. Marlin, **The Seven Churches of Asia Minor** (Nashville, TN: Williams Printing Company, 1980), p. 75.
- 3 Homer Hailey, **Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary** (Louisville, KY: Religious Supply, 1992), p. 129.
- 4 Marlin, p. 76.
- 5 Roy H. Deaver, **Revelation Simplified** (Bedford, TX: Roy H. Deaver Publishing, 1979), p. 32.
- 6 Marlin, p. 76.
- 7 Hailey, p. 129.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Marlin, p. 77.
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- 11 Deaver, p. 32.
- 12 Hailey, p. 129.
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- 15 Ibid.
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- 17 Hailey, p. 133.
- 18 Taylor, p. 101.
- 19 Barry Grider, "Littleton, Colorado Will it Make a Difference?," **The Southwesterner** (Austin: The Southwest church of Christ, 16 May 1999).
- 20 Hailey, p. 131.
- 21 Taylor, p. 102.
- 22 Hailey, p. 133.
- 23 Ibid.

24 Howard Winters, **Commentary on Revelation**
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CHAPTER 13

Lessons From The Church At Laodicea

Victor Eskew

Introduction

IMAGINE A CITY NESTLED in the lush valley of a river. Imagine again a city founded by a mighty king and named for his regal wife. Picture in your mind's eye a metropolis which rose to great power under a mighty government. Think of a municipality through which the trade routes running from the East and West must pass. Banks are found on every corner. Gold, silver, and treasures flow freely and are hoarded by the townspeople. Picture also a city with a hospital on the outskirts of town and a sheep industry which flourishes on the hillsides surrounding the city walls. This city contains two distinct groups of people transplanted from a far away place. Its worship is centered upon a Greek god named Zeus. This was the city of Laodicea.

Into this city, the Gospel of Christ was introduced. Christianity made its residence there. Although Paul had not been to the city, his fellowlabourers apparently had been. A faithful minister named Epaphras was well-known by the Christians. Two neighboring towns also had churches of Christ within them—Colossae and Hierapolis.

The church at Laodicea is mentioned in only two books of the New Testament. My task is to examine this first-century group of baptized believers, looking for their

strengths and weaknesses. Your task is to give ear to what the Spirit said to this church. Each of us is to imitate its strengths and purge out any weaknesses wherein we resemble this congregation of the Lord's people.

Weaknesses Of The Church

The weaknesses of this church are numerous. They are all found within the seventh letter to the churches of Asia in the book of Revelation. Let's turn to Revelation 3:14-22 and examine the frailties of this church:

And unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write; These things saith the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God; I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth. Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent. Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me. To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.

Tepid

This church was lukewarm. The description of this condition is plainly defined in the Biblical text: "...thou art neither cold nor hot" (Rev. 3:15). The word "cold" is defined as "chilly." It usually indicates those who have not named the name of Christ. They profess no adherence or loyalty to Him at all. The term "hot" comes from a Greek word which means "to boil." It describes the Christian who is steadfast in good works (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 15:58). He is "fervent in spirit" (Rom. 12:11). His efforts are described by the word "zealous." The Laodicean church was "neither." They were between the two extremes.

In his book, **The Seven Churches of Asia**, James M. Tolle gives a description of the lukewarm members:

They are the members who are careless in private prayer, Bible study, and self-examination. Their attendance at public worship is usually limited to one service weekly. They tend to be niggardly in their giving. They show little concern for the work programs of the local congregation. Hardly ever do they visit the sick, sinful, suffering mankind. They even tend to exalt the sin of lukewarmness to the rank of virtue. They speak admiringly of the zealous business man and the zealous citizen; but when they speak of the zealous Christian, the word suddenly changes its meaning and becomes little better than a sarcasm and a sneer. They are smug, self-complacent, and self-satisfied (p. 73).

How many Christians do we know who fit this mold? They are found in every congregation of the Lord's people. They do not curse the Lord Jesus, but they do not honor Him enough to be diligent in their service to Him. They do not loathe Him, but they do not love Him enough to be

faithful in His work. They do enough to be self-satisfied, but they fail to see that their efforts make the Lord sick at His stomach: "...I would that thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth" (Rev. 3:15b-16).

Inaccurate Self-Examination

A second weakness of the Laodicean church is found in their inaccurate self-examination. Look again at the opening words of verse 17: "Because **thou sayest**, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing..." (emp. mine, VE). When they looked at themselves they saw one thing; the Lord, however, saw something else: "...and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked."

Self-examination is essential. It is commanded in 2 Corinthians 13:5: "Examine yourselves whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves, Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?" We must place our lives on the witness stand. We must cross-examine all aspects of our lives. This must be done routinely by all of God's children. The problem comes when we do not accurately examine the state of our lives. The Laodiceans looked only upon the outside. They failed to look deep within. Outwardly they were rich. Inwardly they were poor. Outwardly they were well-clothed. Inwardly, they were naked. Outwardly, they saw their prosperity. Inwardly, they were blind to their true spiritual condition before God.

Inaccurate self-examination can happen to almost anyone. We want to be right in the sight of God. We want to think of ourselves as "good" Christians. We want to be able to lay our heads down at night, thinking that if we pass from this life we will hear the words, "Well done thou good and faithful servant." To see the evil in our lives

means that we must humble ourselves. It means that we must admit that we are wrong. It means that we must change things, give up things, and invest in things that may not be pleasing and self-satisfying.

When was the last time you really put your spiritual life to the test? What was your final verdict? If you went away satisfied, you may need to reexamine your life. Remember the true judgment could come this very night: “But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be which thou hast provided?” (Luke 12:20).

Trust In Uncertain Riches

The city of Laodicea was very wealthy—so wealthy, in fact, that, when an earthquake ravaged the city in 60 B.C., they denied the bountiful assistance from Rome. They were independent, self-sufficient, in need of nothing. This same attitude infested some of the membership at Laodicea. Remember, they said, “I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing.” That last little phrase literally says, “I do not need one thing.” The Laodiceans had come to trust in their riches.

What the Lord had foretold in His parable of the sower had become true in Laodicea: “He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful” (Matt. 13:22). Riches deceive the heart. They make us feel sufficient and satisfied. The longer we have them, the more we trust in them. Thus, the command of 1 Timothy 6:17-19 reads:

Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; that they do good, that they

be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate; laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.

The Laodiceans had not done this. This is evident from verse twenty. The Lord is found on the outside, knocking to get back in.

This can happen in the lives of individual members. It can happen to single congregations. It can happen to schools of preaching. It can happen to Christian colleges and universities. Money can be accumulated. The balance on the bank statement can lull one into a sense of self-sufficiency. One no longer feels that he is accountable, even to the living God. The words of the wisdom writer then come to pass: "He that trusteth in his riches shall fall" (Prov. 11:28).

Jesus Is Cast Out

Another flaw in the Laodicean church is found in verse 20 of Revelation 3. The Lord states, "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me." The Lord was cast out of the presence of this congregation. The interesting thing is that they were not even aware of it. They thought the Lord was still among them.

Christ is to be the very center of our lives: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). When we begin to trust in other things, we shut Him out. For a while, He will stand, and knock, and plead for the door of our heart to be open. However, He will not tarry forever:

Because I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; but ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof: I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh; when your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish cometh upon you. Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me: for they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the Lord: they would none of my counsel; they despised all my reproof. Therefore shall they eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled with their own devices. For the turning away of the simple shall slay them, and the prosperity of fools shall slay them (Prov. 1:24-32).

The key is to have an open ear. We must listen to the Lord's pleadings. Once heard, we should open the door quickly and invite the Divine guest in once again.

Closed Ears

This leads us to the last weakness of this congregation. Their ears were closed to the voice of the Lord. He was calling on the outside of the door, saying, "Please, open the door, and let me in." The Spirit, too, was calling for those who had ears to hear. The Laodiceans had put their hands over their ears. There was no hearing. The evidence of a missing church in Laodicea proves they continued to stop their ears.

Dear readers, we have been told from the Father to listen to His Son: "While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him" (Matt. 17:5). James tells us to

be very quick to hear: “Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath” (Jas. 1:19). Sad it would be to one day notice that the Lord is no longer in your midst. Sadder would it be to seek for Him, and His presence no longer be found. Give heed to the words of the wise: “I love them that love me; and those that seek me early shall find me” (Prov. 8:17).

Strengths Of The Church

Are There Any To Mention?

As one reads through the passages of Scripture found in the Revelation, he begins to believe that there are no strengths about which to comment regarding the church at Laodicea. There are several commentators who have positively asserted that the church in Laodicea had no positives. This writer believes differently. He believes that there were many strengths found within this church. I might be better to call these things positives which the church at Laodicea could have relied upon had they desired to do so. Let us move forward in our examination of Laodicea to prove these assertions.

A Solid Base

The strengths seen by this author are four in number. First, this congregation had been established on a very solid base. In our introduction we noted that several of Paul’s companions, his students, were instrumental in founding the church in Laodicea. One of these men was named Epaphras. Paul writes of this man’s care for the church in Laodicea in Colossians 4:12-13:

Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always labouring fervently for you in prayer, that ye may stand perfect and complete

in all the will of God. For I bear him record, that he hath a great zeal for you, and them that are in Laodicea, and them in Hierapolis.

In the same epistle, Epaphras is described as a “dear fellowservant” of the apostle Paul and as a “faithful minister of Christ” (Col. 1:7).

The Truth of the Gospel had been proclaimed in the ears of these individuals. They had faithful ministers who labored zealously among them. This is a strength. God’s Word is extremely powerful:

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart (Heb. 4:12).

As long as these faithful men were allowed to preach and teach God’s Word, there was hope:

For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: so shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it (Isa. 55:10-11).

The presence of faithful preachers of the Gospel is no guarantee that congregations will remain faithful. However, if a lover of truth is proclaiming the inspired Word of God, there is the possibility that men will be taught, reprov'd, corrected, and instructed (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Financial Security

Another strength which this congregation had was its financial security. Money and treasures do not have to be evil. If a congregation can be faithful in their stewardship of the wealth supplied to them, many wonderful things can be accomplished for the Lord's cause. Acts 4:32-37 is proof of this:

And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common. And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all. Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need. And Joses, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas, (which is being interpreted, The son of consolation,) a Levite, and of the country of Cyprus, having land, sold it, and brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet.

How many of you labor within congregations where you wish more money could be found? How many of you know of good works which are constantly crying out for more money? How many of you wish that you yourself had more money to give to worthy causes and proclaimers of the Gospel? Laodicea did not have to long for these things. She had them. Used wisely, the borders of the kingdom could have been expanded in the Lycus valley and in Asia Minor. Yes, Jesus said that it is hard for a rich

man to enter into the kingdom of heaven, but He did not say it was impossible. Money can be a medium by which many souls can be brought into a saved relationship with Jesus Christ.

Neighboring Congregations

A third strength which Laodicea had was the presence of neighboring congregations of the Lord's people. These congregations were Colossae and Hierapolis. In the midst of a wealthy, self-sufficient environment, Laodicea could have relied upon her fellowship with these other congregations to help them remain strong amidst the trials of life. Ministers circulated among these churches. The inspired letters of the apostle Paul circulated among them also. Surely the brethren in the region were familiar with each other.

Bible study could have been a part of their fellowship periods. Partaking of God's Word together could have helped to build them up (Acts 20:32). Prayer could have also been a part of their periods of communion. This would have elicited the help of the hand of Him who moves the universe (Heb. 4:16). Worship of the heavenly Father could have also been shared with each other. This would have enabled them to provoke one another to love and good works (10:21-25).

This strength is often neglected by churches in our present time. Daily fellowship with members of our home congregations is seldom in many cases, and much less time is spent with members of other congregations. Gospel meetings are not shared enough by members of congregations. Lectureships are not taken advantage of. Monthly singings are neglected by many. We spend countless hours of association with those in the world. We spend four or five hours each week with our brethren. Is there any wonder that the world has the ability to shape and mold us contrary to Romans 12:2?

God's Nature Supporting Them

The fourth element of strength in Laodicea did not lie within the church, but in the nature of God. This element of strength is seen particularly in the book of Revelation. This congregation had become unfaithful in their service to the Christ. They had locked Him out. Yet, many aspects of God's nature enabled them to continue on for a period of time. First, God was willing to give them an accurate appraisal of their spiritual condition. The faithful and true witness spoke, saying, "I know thy works...." He spelled out their spiritual condition in detail, noting exactly what they were.

We may think that they were blessed more than we are because of this. In reality, however, this is not the case. The letters to the seven churches were not written just to those churches. Each one concludes with a statement calling for those who have ears to hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches. Within these letters there are messages for congregations today. Time and circumstances may change, but the actions of individuals remain the same. We are to compare our actions with theirs and make corrections if needed. We are to be doers of the Word, and not just hearers. Let us never think that God's Word cannot give us an accurate appraisal of our spiritual condition. We need only to look into the mirror and examine ourselves (Jas. 1:21-25).

A second element of the Lord's nature that helped this congregation was His patience. The Lord saw that their condition was wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked, yet, He did not immediately bring destruction upon them. He called upon them to repent (Rev. 3:19). He gave them time to make the necessary corrections in their lives so that His wrath did not have to come upon them.

This element of patience was seen in the days of Noah. He gave the antediluvians the space of one hundred twenty years to repent (Gen. 6:3). This same element of God's

nature continues to this day. God wants individuals to be saved. He does not want to have to punish them. Thus, He is longsuffering and patient with us: “The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9).

We should be careful here, and not allow the time that we have to lull us into thinking that we have all the time in the world to change. The floodwaters did come upon that old world. Candlesticks were removed from their places in the first century. For us, the day of the Lord will eventually come:

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up (2 Pet. 3:10).

Right now is the only time that we have been promised. Therefore, men need to take advantage of the moment: “For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2).

A third element of God’s nature that was working on behalf of the church at Laodicea was His love. “As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten...” (Rev. 3:19). God’s love runs deep for lost humanity. That was made evidently manifest on the cross of Calvary (John 3:16). As a father out of love chastens his son, so the Lord rebukes His children. The purpose of such correction, according to the Hebrews writer, was to yield positive fruit in the lives of the Laodiceans:

For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth...Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby (Heb. 12:6,11).

God's discipline is still present in the lives of His children. If it were not, then we would not be sons according to Hebrews 12:8. God reproveth and rebuketh. Often this is done through the voice of preachers and teachers of His Word. Our responsibility is to act like mature children in taking the discipline. We should not cry out, "That's not fair," or, "I hate you." Rather, we need to listen to the Lord's reproof and make the corrections for which he is asking. Remember, and do not forget

the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth (12:5-6).

Still another aspect of Christ which helped this congregation was His desire to have fellowship with them. Verse 20 of Revelation 3 pictures Jesus standing outside the door, calling to the Laodiceans, knocking upon their door, seeking entrance. If only the door would be opened, He would come in and sup with them. The Lord did not want to be their enemy. He did not want to walk away from them. He wanted to sit at the banquet table with them and enjoy the close intimacy of fellowship with his friends.

What a lofty thought! The Lord Jesus Christ wants to have close fellowship with us. He desires to call us His

brethren (Heb. 2:11). Why would any refuse? Why would any turn down His offer to feast with Him? What part of His friendship is not desirable? He would never hurt us. He would never turn His back on us. He would always be willing to help us. His love, comfort, edification, and consolation would always be there for us. He would never forsake us. He would be that friend which sticketh closer than a brother (Prov. 18:24). Not many of us have close, intimate friendships such as this. One would think that the possibility of such a relationship would cause all to seek such a Friend. What a power would be at one's disposal if that kind of friendship could be had!

Lastly, the Laodicean church had the Great Rewarder offering them a prize: "To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne" (Rev. 3:21). Here the offer was to be able to sit with Him upon His throne. Only royalty sits upon the throne. Only the children of the King can sit with the King. That was God's motivating force. He wanted to reward the overcomer with position, power, and prestige.

The Hebrews penman wrote that God is "a rewarder of them that diligently seek him" (Heb. 11:6). God attempts to motivate us to follow Him with tremendous rewards. You and I can also have the privilege of reigning with Him: "It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him: if we suffer, we shall also reign with him" (2 Tim. 2:11-12a). A crown, a robe, a ring, and a position beside the King can all be ours. It could have been the Laodiceans' if only they would have repented and turned back to their Master.

The Closeness Of A Cure

A final strength which this congregation had was the immediate availability of a cure for the things which

ailed them. The Great Physician offered them gold tried in the fire, white raiment to clothe their nakedness, and eyesalve to heal their spiritual blindness (Rev. 3:18). However, to buy these items involved the acts of self-sacrifice and self-denial. It would cost them their self-sufficient attitude. It would have to be replaced with the reliance upon another with healing in His wings.

The cost was minimal, but was extreme at the same time. The cure, however, was immediate. The same is true for us today. Self must be slain, but in so doing life is found:

If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall find it (Luke 9:23-24).

That life will consist of “treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3). It will involve robes of righteousness (Isa. 61:10) and white raiment made white in the blood of the lamb (Rev. 7:14). It will involve eyesight that can see beyond this world into the invisible, eternal realms above (Heb. 11:27). The return is well worth the investment. Sadly, many are like the Laodiceans and do not know how really sick they are.

Conclusion

Although we are almost 1900 years removed from the Laodicean church, our wealthy culture parallels the past. Lukewarmness and self-sufficiency are two of the greatest problems in the church today. They blind and deceive. Many never seek any type of a cure because they do not realize they are wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.

My friends, it is up to us to take the message of this congregation to the churches. They need to hear what the

Spirit continues to say to the churches. All hope is not lost. The Lord patiently waits. He loves. He desires fellowship and will reward all overcomers. Some will hear. Some will open the door of their hearts. And some will sit down at the feast of the Lord. Again, this will only happen if we preach the message of the Laodicean church to the brethren. Let us not be among the number of those who are lukewarm and satisfied, thinking that we stand in need of nothing. If we are, we need to be zealous and repent!

CHAPTER 14

Lessons From The Church At Thyatira

Keith Cozort

Introduction

I *CONSIDER THE INVITATION TO* speak again on this year's **POWER** Lectureship a high honor and privilege. I always look forward to this lectureship and highly regard its Director, brother B. J. Clarke, as a faithful proclaimer of the gospel and a friend. I commend the elders of this congregation, Larry Everson, Bill Pierce, and Coleman Simpson, for their willingness to stand for the Truth and oppose error. May their number increase throughout our beloved brotherhood.

The subject which has been assigned to me is **Lessons From The Church At Thyatira**. It is going to be our objective to examine several aspects concerning this church: 1) the location and background of Thyatira, 2) the history of the Lord's church in Thyatira, 3) the positive lessons we can learn from these brethren, and 4) the negative lessons we need to learn from them as well.

Location And Background Of Thyatira

The city of Thyatira, which is located in the country of Turkey, means "the castle of Thya."¹ Its modern name is Akhisar or Ackisar, meaning "the white tower."² It has also been known by the names Pelopia and Euhippia, according to Pliny.³ It is located about halfway between the cities of

Pergamos, now called Bergama, and Sardis, whose current name is Saliki. The distance from Pergamos to Thyatira is about 44 miles and from Thyatira to Sardis about 33 miles. It is situated between the Caicus and Hermus valleys on the Lycus River in Asia Minor. Thyatira is on the east bank of the river and has an elevation of about 330 feet. Its current population numbers about 50,000 people.⁴

This city was basically considered to be unimportant, both militarily and politically. It did not possess any natural defenses from enemy attacks. Militarily its only importance was that of a strategic position to delay any aggressor who may be headed for Pergamos, the capital of the province. This required a military outpost to be placed in Thyatira. It was never expected that the military forces would be able to stop an intruding army but only that they would be able to delay or slow down the attackers until Pergamos could ready themselves for battle.

The road from Sardis to Pergamos, on which Thyatira was located, was “the official Post Road and carrying the commerce of both Asia and that from the East, [and] Thyatira of necessity became a great commercial center.”⁵ The result would be the large number of trade guilds (unions) to be found in Thyatira. In fact, it was reported that there were more trade guilds in the city of Thyatira than in any other Asian city of its size. Among them were wool workers, linen workers, tailors, leather workers, potters, bakers, tanners, bronzesmiths, slave dealers and dyers. Each of the guilds had an association with an idol (false god), who supposedly was a guardian over the guild. Those individuals who became associated with these guilds would be expected to participate in the feasts offered to the idol, which also included eating meat which had been sacrificed to the idol. If someone refused to join the trade guild, the reprisals were even more serious than if an

individual should refuse to join a labor union today. Refusal to join actually caused a person to give up all hope of commercial prosperity and commercial existence.

There are only three references to the city of Thyatira in the Bible. All three are located in the New Testament (Acts 16:14; Rev. 1:11; 2:18-24). Therefore the majority of our information concerning this city is from secular writers.

In my preparation for this study I came across a series of “twos” that I believe will help us remember the lessons from Thyatira.

Located Between Two Great Cities

As we have already mentioned, the city of Thyatira was located between the cities of Sardis and Pergamos. Both of these cities were extremely important to this area of Asia Minor. Sardis was considered to be the chief city of Lydia and at one time was the capital of the Lydian Empire.⁶ Pergamos “enjoyed the reputation of being Asia’s most illustrious city.”⁷ Sandwiched in between these two cities of great reputation was the insignificant city of Thyatira. Its main notoriety was being considered the gateway to Pergamos.

The city of Thyatira was inhabited before 300 B.C. but was little more than a village with a temple.⁸ It is generally accepted that the city was refounded by Seleucus Nicator, and was regarded as a Macedonian colony. According to Halley, it “has no illustrious history, and is scarcely mentioned by ancient writers.”⁹

It is worthy of mention that our Lord took notice of the things occurring in a little, insignificant town like Thyatira, just as He did the big, metropolitan capital city of Pergamos. Therefore, we do not have to be in a large city and in large churches for heaven’s attention to be drawn toward us.

Two Characteristics Of The Guilds

The trade guilds were known for meeting in the temple of an idol which had been dedicated to their trade. Even if they did not meet in the temple, they would begin and end their meeting with a formal sacrifice to the god of their guild. The purpose for doing such was to appease the guild god, and thereby they could anticipate receiving his protection and abundant blessings.

It also was the common practice to eat a meal while in the temple. The meat which was served at these meals was normally meat which had been offered as a sacrifice to their trade god in worship. This, of course, would be similar to the “eating of meats offered to idols” issue which the apostle Paul addressed in his first epistle to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 8). One major difference between the situation in Thyatira and that of Corinth was the fact that those members of the trade guild would intentionally eat the meat which had been offered as a sacrifice as a means of worshiping that false god. In Corinth, they were buying meat in the marketplace for food which had already been offered as a sacrifice to the idolatrous gods.

We are also informed that these communal meals served as opportunities for drunken revelry and extremely lax, or slack, morality. It was not uncommon for the practice of fornication or adultery to be included in these festivities. The reason behind such would be to show respect and obedience to these false deities.

Two Major Exports

The city of Thyatira was known for many different exports, as would be evident from the numerous guilds in the city. We would like to note two of them at this time in our study.

Thyatira was situated in an area which was well-watered, being located on the east bank of the Lycus River.

There were also innumerable streamlets, pools and ponds located in the general area of the city. Due to the abundance of water, one of the occupations to be found in and around the city was the selling of leeches. These leeches were used for medicinal purposes and exported throughout Austria and various parts of eastern Europe. These mostly flattened, annelid worms have a well-developed sucker at each end of their approximately three-inch body. One species, the *Hirudo medicinalis*, has been used by doctors to bleed patients. This may help to explain why some physicians are called “leeches.”¹⁰

The dealers, we are told, would send children out into the various bodies of water for the express purpose of allowing them to become covered with leeches. Then the children would come to their own masters, employers, on the shoreline and the leeches would be removed from their bodies and made ready for shipping to other communities.

Another major export I would like for us to consider is that of dyeing garments. Thyatira was known far and wide for their “Turkish red” dye and their purple cloths (Acts 16:14). These cloths and garments were extremely expensive, and the process whereby they acquired the dye was very time-consuming.

There were two main sources for the red dye. The one which was probably used the least and cost the most was the catching of little shell fish called Murex. It is said that from the throat of this shell fish a drop of purple dye could be extracted and thereby used to color the cloths. This would naturally take a tremendous amount of time and fish in order to receive a significant amount of dye to manufacture these goods. The other source for the red dye was from the madder root which grew abundantly around the city. This process would not be as time consuming nor as laborious and the result would be just as desirable: “the waters here are said to be so well adapted for dyeing

that in no place can the scarlet cloth out of which fezzes are made be so brilliantly or so permanently dyed as here.”¹¹

A “fez” is “a brimless, conical felt hat, usually red, tapering to a flat crown from which a long, black tassel hangs: formerly the Turkish national headdress of men.”¹² Even to this day we are told that large quantities of scarlet cloth are exported to Smyrna.

So it should be with us as New Testament Christians. We are to be securely attached to Christ. The apostle Paul writes:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:35-39).

The answer to Paul’s statement, of course, is that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. But we can separate ourselves by our refusal to be faithful even unto and including the end of our lives (Rev. 2:10).

We also need to remember that purple clothing was often used to distinguish royalty. As New Testament Christians, we are royalty. We are brothers and sisters of the King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 19:16). We have been washed and continue to be washed in royal blood for the forgiveness of our sins (Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14; 1 John 1:7).

Two Women Of Thyatira

There are two women whose names appear in Scripture pertaining to Thyatira. They serve as the ultimate contrast in temperament, character and holiness.

The first woman was working in the city of Philippi, but she was from Thyatira. Her name was Lydia (Acts 16:14-15,40). Her name probably was a result of having been born in the territory of Lydia. It “was a very common name among the Greeks and Romans.”¹³ She is described as one who was “a seller of purple” (16:14). This would certainly indicate her industry as a business woman, much like the virtuous woman (Prov. 31:10-31).

She is also described as one who worshiped God. When Paul, Silas, Luke, and Timothy taught the women who came to the river to pray, Lydia heard them preaching. Her heart was opened by the Lord through the preaching of Paul and she “attended,” meaning “to hold the mind towards, to pay attention to, to be cautious about,”¹⁴ to the words spoken by him. As a result, Lydia and her household were baptized (Acts 16:15).

There is no indication in Scripture that Lydia was married, even though many religionists claim she must have at least been married sometime in the past because she had a “household.” This conclusion does not stand up under an unbiased examination with the true light. Strong’s says “household” means: “a dwelling (more or less extensive, lit. or fig.); by implication a family (more or less related, lit. or fig.): -home.”¹⁵ It is certainly possible to have a “household,” which could include extended family members (siblings, cousins), and have neither husband or children.

Her willingness to show hospitality to Paul and his companions is to be highly praised and commended. There appears to have been some hesitancy on the part of Paul and this would be perfectly understandable if Lydia was

not married. Therefore Luke tells us Lydia “constrained us.” The term “constrained” means, “to force contrary to (nature), i.e. compel (by entreaty).”¹⁶ Lydia was certainly a woman who represented the people of the city of Thyatira admirably.

The other woman of Thyatira referred to in Scripture is one named Jezebel. There is much discussion by commentators as to whether this is an actual woman being described or if Christ, through the apostle John, is using her name as a symbol illustrating what is taking place in the church at Thyatira.

There is no doubt that the symbolism refers to the wife of King Ahab of the nation of Israel, the northern kingdom (1 Kings 16:30-31). This Jezebel was the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Zidonians. Under her influence her husband served and worshiped the false god, Baal:

The god of Jezebel was Melkarth the Baal of Tyre. He was the kind of god who required the burning of innocent little children at the oblations upon his altar. He was believed to be the lord of the land; and to induce him to send rain upon the earth, fertility cult practices were engaged in and sacrifices were offered.¹⁷

This helps us to understand why the prophet Elijah prayed for no rain to fall on Israel for a period of forty-two months, or three-and-one-half years (1 Kings 17:1; 18:1; Jas. 5:17-18). God used this to show He was the true God and He was the One who had real power. This, of course, was the same message He sent to Pharaoh and the Egyptians with the ten plagues. Each of the plagues was a direct attack upon one of the Egyptian false deities.

This woman, Jezebel, was the epitome of female wickedness: “She came to stand for everything that is corrupt and despicable in a woman.”¹⁸ She labored diligently

against God, His Law, and those who worshiped Him, by her support of the four hundred prophets of the groves (1 Kings 18:19). She was even willing to have God's spokesmen, Elijah, and the other prophets, put to death (18:13; 19:2) if they crossed her. Jezebel was also a murderer of good, innocent men like Naboth (21:1-14).

This gives us some insight into the Jezebel of Thyatira and her influence. Indications are that she was a manipulator of the Christians in the church at Thyatira. Likely, she was an encourager of compromise as it related to the guilds, as we noted earlier, and their worship to the false gods. She is pictured by our Lord as one who calls herself a "prophetess." Evidently she claimed some Divine revelation from God as to His acceptance of these practices due to the fact that brethren's livelihood would be cut off should they leave or speak out against the guilds practices.

The Christians in Thyatira

probably rationalized by saying that they had knowledge that an idol is nothing (see notes on 1 Cor. 8 and 10). Therefore their association with the guilds was innocent, even though their membership implied recognition of an idol as an object of worship, and part of that worship was committing fornication.¹⁹

This Jezebel was guilty of fornication. As stated before, fornication was sometimes a part of and a result of the worship offered to the guild gods. The likelihood is that the reference is to spiritual fornication rather than physical fornication. God often judged the Jews as guilty of harlotry and fornication when they turned away from Him and turned to idolatry.

The church today needs more women like Lydia, who will lead their household by a good and wholesome

example, and none like Jezebel, who seek to do whatever they can to cripple the church's influence and destroy strong, faithful Christians.

Two Kinds Of Worship

In the Biblical account of the church at Thyatira, we have two kinds of worship presented. There is the false worship of the sun god and the true worship of our Father in heaven along with the Son of righteousness:

The chief deity of the city was Tyrimnos, who was identified with the Greek sun god Apollo, and in whose honor games were held at various intervals.²⁰

Tyrimnos is portrayed on the early coins of Thyatira as a "horseman, bearing a double-headed battle-ax, similar to those represented on the sculptures of the Hittites."²¹ Other so-called gods which have been mentioned in connection with the city of Thyatira include "Sibyl—the female diviner"²² and "Artemis—the god of the Ephesians."²³

The worship of these so-called "gods" was a complete violation of every principle taught in the Word of God as to whom should receive homage and reverence. It has always been wrong to worship other gods and to bow down to images or idols (Exod. 20:3-4; Deut. 6:13-15; Jer. 25:6; Matt. 4:10). The rationalization behind doing such makes no difference at all!

The true worship of God the Father was also taking place in the city of Thyatira. This worship was with the understanding that "God is a spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). Our Lord, when answering the question, "which is the great commandment of the law?" stated, "Thou shalt love

the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind” (Matt. 22:36-37). In Luke’s account, He added the phrase, “with all thy strength” (Luke 10:27). In other words, every ounce of our being is to be used in loving God and working to remain faithful to Him and His Word.

Thyatira certainly had a problem with those who would worship the sun god, but the Son of God speaks to the church and describes Himself as the One “who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet are like fine brass” (Rev. 2:18). Some seem to think that our Lord is using terms which would make the Thyatirans think about the representations of Apollo or Tyrimnos. Jesus would be picturing Himself as the one and only Son of God. Likely, it would also have some reference to the bronze or brass workers and their fashioning abilities.

Christ is the one who truly has eyes like flaming fire. He is able to see all things. He is omniscient in eyesight. There is absolutely nothing which escapes His notice. He is able to strip the disguises away and see the innermost parts of the heart and mind of man. These blazing eyes would also show His intense anger for sin and see their attempts to compromise with Jezebel and her offspring.

His feet are as fine brass. Fine brass feet would be beautiful to behold by those who are faithful to Him and to His Word. But they would bring a crushing blow to any and all opposition against His authority and power (Matt. 28:18). William Barclay says, “A message which begins like that will certainly be no soothing tranquilliser.”²⁴

Christ is the one who can truly say, “I know thy works,” as He did to each of the seven churches in Asia Minor. He knew about not only their works but also their “charity,” or love. Love, Paul says, is the greatest of the pristine trio: faith, hope, charity (1 Cor. 13:13). Christ knew

about their “service.” Service is a natural outcome of charity. When a Christian truly loves God and man, then religious and moral duties will naturally flow forth.

Our Lord also knew about their “faith.” Faith is absolutely essential to become a Christian but it is also essential to remain right with God after becoming a Christian (Jas. 2:14-26). He also states that He is well-aware of their “patience.” Patience carries forth the idea of steadfastness and endurance. Paul told the Roman brethren to be “patient in tribulation continuing stedfastly in prayer” (Rom. 12:12). We are certainly encouraged to be “stedfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58). It is extremely unfortunate that many brethren are not willing to be patient and endure the trials and persecutions which Paul told Timothy would come to all who would “live godly in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:12). Finally, Christ affirms, “thy works; and the last to be more than the first.” This was a major difference between the church at Thyatira and the church at Ephesus. The Ephesian brethren were admonished, “Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works” (Rev. 2:5).

With all of these commendations the One with “eyes like unto a flame of fire” knew that everything was not right in the church. He stated, “Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee” (Rev. 2:20). He begins to speak against their tolerance of the woman Jezebel and her false prophecies. She has been allowed to exert her influence for so long that she is described as having “offspring.” These would be followers—converts to her way of thinking. Because of such tolerance, souls have been lost from exclusive service to God. Instead of working for God, they are working for Satan, knowing “the depths of Satan” (2:24). These, our Lord says, will be put to death (2:23). They will serve as examples of God’s displeasure with those who turn their backs on Him.

In the Lord's church today we need more brethren who are concerned about being right with God when it comes to their worship. We need those who will defend the New Testament form, or pattern, of worship, even if it means having fewer numbers in attendance.

Two Kinds Of Brethren

Finally, due to the two kinds of worship, we see two kinds of brethren described by the Savior of the world.

First, there are those who are looking for the way of ease. The prophet Amos, the herdsman from Tekoa, prophesied against those in the northern kingdom of Israel by saying, "Woe to them that are at ease in Zion" (Amos 6:1). God determined to bring judgment against His people because they had turned away from Him and turned to idolatry. He had Amos to tell them:

Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord: and they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, and shall not find it (8:11-12).

These who are looking for ease are ones who are searching for a religion of self-gratification. In order to receive such, they have to follow and worship a god of convenience and compromise, just like those of Thyatira.

So many brethren today are as the Israelites who, after entering into the land of promise, wanted to be like all the nations around them and have a king to lead them (1 Sam. 8:19-20). They were not satisfied with God as their leader and abiding by His Word. They wanted to be like everybody else. They did not want to be different, or

separate. They wanted to “fit in” with others in the area. Those brethren who are clamoring for “change” in the church are following the same road, and the result will also be the same.

The other group of brethren at Thyatira were those willing to follow after and to worship the true and living God. They were brethren of conviction and righteousness. These brethren understood what Paul told the Roman church:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God (Rom. 12:1-2).

These were brethren whom our Lord describes as workers. They were active in doing the work of the Lord, and their last works were more than the first (Rev. 2:19). They were promised by Christ, “I will put upon you none other burden” (2:24). Oh, how we need more brethren like this in the church today!

Conclusion

There are a great many **Lessons From The Church At Thyatira**, and we certainly have not covered all of them. It is my prayer that we will take these lessons which we have discussed and make proper application to our own situations and lives. We need to be active workers in the Lord’s Kingdom, faithful in our service to God and attempting to make sure we heed the warning given to all seven of the churches of Asia Minor: “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches” (Rev. 2:7,11,17,29; 3:6,13,22).

Endnotes

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CHAPTER 15

Lessons From The Church At Smyrna

Kevin Beard

Introduction

ON THE COAST OF the Aegean sea, in western Asia, the beautiful city of Smyrna thrived. Though it was not the largest or most prominent city in the province, it basked in the glory of being one of the most beautiful. Smyrna had it all: economic strength, beautiful architecture, the favor of Imperial Rome. However, of all the amenities Smyrna could boast, one was overlooked and even disdained: the Lord's church was in Smyrna.

Today, the glory of ancient Smyrna has faded and been mostly forgotten. But the one truly bright spot in that city has been remembered. Revelation 2:8-11 records the Lord's letter to this exemplary congregation. Though the Christians in Smyrna are not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible, their faithfulness has been an encouraging example for Christians of all ages. Unlike the other churches of Asia (except for Philadelphia), the Lord found nothing in Smyrna to criticize. How many churches today could have the Lord find nothing to criticize? Surely there is much to be learned from the church at Smyrna.

The City Of Smyrna

Though the church has been called out of the world, it cannot be denied that the world in which the church

exists has a major impact in the character building process of that congregation. The temptations and trials it faces offer it opportunity to grow stronger (Jas. 1:2-4). The specific opportunities to spread the Gospel, help the needy, and demonstrate the Christian life force the local congregation to decide how it will carry out Christ's will in their location. Since every community is unique, then the church in a particular community is uniquely affected by that community. Knowing this, a study of the church in Smyrna must include a look at that congregation's environment. What was the city itself like? What kinds of difficulties and opportunities did it provide for the Lord's church there?

Smyrna was an ancient city, existing as far back as 1100 B.C. It had been controlled by various people until the third century B.C., when it was entirely rebuilt by Lysimachus on a new site southwest of the original city.¹ His new city was beautifully designed with wide, well-paved streets and wonderful architecture. This city became a great center of trade, with its outlet to the Aegean Sea, and its access to a major highway leading to the east.

One of Smyrna's landmarks was Mount Pagos, a high hill rising above the city. This hill was encircled like a crown with beautiful temples to the pagan gods.² The beautiful "street of gold," which began at the temple of Zeus and ended at the temple of Cybele, encircled the hill, giving it the appearance of a necklace around the neck of a reclining giant wearing a great crown.³ Smyrna was admired greatly for its beauty. It was known as the "crown of Asia." So when the Lord made His promise that the faithful would receive a "crown of life" (Rev. 2:10), the citizens of this beautiful city would be encouraged to know that, while the crown of Smyrna may bring glory to the pagans, the crown the Lord would give would be one which would never fade away.

The Bible is silent concerning the establishment of the church in Smyrna. Perhaps it was established when Paul was in Ephesus, a city not far away. Maybe some travelers from Smyrna had business in Ephesus and learned the Gospel and went back to their city as faithful children of God. However the church began in that city, by the time Revelation was written, the church there was alive and pleasing to the Lord.

Smyrna's Good Qualities

The only Bible reference to the church in Smyrna is found in the Lord's letters to the seven churches of Asia (Rev. 2:8-11). Smyrna, like Philadelphia, received no rebuke at all from the Lord, but they did receive much commendation and encouragement. Smyrna must have been a working church. As with the other churches, the Lord told Smyrna, "I know thy works" (2:9). With some of Smyrna's neighbors, this statement was both a commendation and a rebuke. Pergamos had held fast and not denied the name of Christ, yet they allowed the false teachings of some to continue (2:12-15). Thyatira had much to be commended for, yet they allowed the woman Jezebel to continue in her sinful ways (2:18-20). But Smyrna received no rebuke from the Lord. The Lord knew their works, yet He condemned none of them! From this we must assume that this church was busy working for His cause.

Jesus expects local congregations to be active in His work, demonstrating the same attitude which He demonstrated: "I must work the works of Him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh when no man can work" (John 9:4). Paul admonished those churches to whom he wrote to be active in the work of the Lord. He told the Colossians of his continuing prayer for them to be filled with the knowledge of the Lord's will. That knowledge would cause them to be "fruitful in every good work" (Col.

1:9-10). In view of the resurrection at the last day, Paul told the church in Corinth to be “stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58). He reminded the Philippians, a church already active in the Lord’s work, to continue their good work: “Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12). He told the Thessalonians of his continued prayer of thanksgiving for their “work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope” (1 Thess. 1:3). The church which pleases the Lord is the church which works for the Lord.

Too often congregations lose sight of the fact that their reason for existing is to work for the Lord. Some, like the church in Laodicea, become self-sufficient and apathetic. They forget that it is God Who is responsible for all that they have and that He expects them not only to rely on Him but also to be busy serving Him. Sometimes, too, congregations seem to forget what it means to do the Lord’s work. In some places they spend more time looking for ways to entertain themselves than they do trying to reach the lost with the Gospel of Christ.

Some congregations seem to think that the primary work of the church is to assemble together to worship. To avoid this idea, many churches have placed signs above the doors entering and exiting their auditoriums which read “Enter to Worship” and “Depart to Serve.” The worship of God is not the sum total of the church’s work. All churches today would do well to follow the example set by the church in Smyrna and be busy doing the Lord’s work. He knows the works of all His congregations; surely it would be better for Him to see them active in His work.

Smyrna also pleased the Lord by standing up to opposition. This congregation already had endured some period of tribulation; that was one of the things Jesus told

them He knew about them. This tribulation seems to have come from the Jewish population of Smyrna. The Lord said, "I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan" (Rev. 2:9). The Jews are no longer God's chosen people. Many religious groups have strayed far from the Bible because they have failed to see this truth. But Paul explained clearly that God's chosen are not the physical descendants of Abraham, but the spiritual descendants of Abraham (Rom. 9:6-8):

For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter (2:28-29).

From the beginning, the Jews were the strongest enemies of the church. It was their persecution, led by Saul, which caused the Christians to flee Jerusalem (Acts 8:1). Later, on Paul's first missionary journey, he and Barnabas experienced the same kinds of persecutions at the hands of the Jews. They were driven from Antioch of Pisidia to Iconium because the unbelieving Jews stirred up the people against them (13:50-51). Then, in Iconium, they escaped being stoned, fleeing to Lystra, because of the opposition of the unbelieving Jews (14:4-6). Then Jews from both Antioch and Iconium came to Lystra and persuaded the people against Paul. The people then stoned him and left him for dead (14:19-20).

But Paul and Barnabas did not allow this opposition to discourage them. They went on to Derbe and then made their way back through Iconium and Antioch, "Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation

enter into the kingdom of God” (14:22). They demonstrated the kind of perseverance in the face of tribulation that the church in Smyrna demonstrated.

These Jews who persecuted the church did so under the false idea that they were doing God’s service (John 16:2). But Jesus said that they were actually the synagogue of Satan. Opposition to the Lord’s cause does not always come from those who openly oppose God; often it comes from those who sincerely claim to be servants of God. Either way, though, they all are the servants of Satan. Remember what Jesus said: “He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad” (Matt. 12:30). So then, the example set by Smyrna shows how important it is to resist the pressures of those who would destroy the work of Christ. If Smyrna had crumbled under those pressures, who would have been left in that city to do the will of the Lord? In the same way, if churches today crumble under the pressures of opposition, whether from without or within the church, who will be left to do the will of the Lord?

The key to dealing with such opposition is perseverance. Choosing to give up or to give in is the same as choosing to depart from Christ. Regardless of the source or the nature of the opposition, churches must remain strong in their dedication to follow the Lord and be faithful to His cause. To help in this resolution the Lord has revealed that opposition will come with service to Him (Matt. 5:11-12; Mark 10:29-30; 2 Tim. 3:12). Thus, expecting to face difficulty because of the faith, Christians can be equipped for those events.

When the Lord looked at the church in Smyrna, He saw a group of Christians who were poor. Certainly He had compassion on them for their physical needs, but He knew that what they lacked in material wealth, they possessed in spiritual wealth. This church was rich toward

God. He reminded them of the true wealth they possessed, saying, "I know thy...poverty, (but thou art rich)" (Rev. 2:9). All congregations ought to realize, as this one did, that true riches are not measured in dollars and cents. To be rich toward God means to rely upon Him and His strength, instead of on material wealth, so that one can use whatever he may have, whether much or little, to glorify God.

Jesus used the phrase "rich toward God" in His parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:21). A man in His audience interrupted Jesus' teaching to ask the Lord to make his brother divide the inheritance with him. Since Jesus was God in the flesh, He was able to read the man's heart and know that he had a problem with covetousness. To help with his problem, Jesus told the parable of the man whose fields yielded an abundant harvest. This man then began to make plans for himself so that he could live a life of ease and enjoy the abundance of his wealth for the rest of his life. However, that very night, God required his soul of him, saying, "then whose shall those things be, which thou has provided?" (12:20). Jesus concluded the teaching by saying, "So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God" (12:21). To be rich toward God, the man should have relied more upon God and less on his money.

On another occasion, a rich young ruler approached Jesus, asking, "Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?" (Matt. 19:16). Again, Jesus was able to know the condition of the young man's heart and made a strict demand for him to sell all that he had, give the money to the poor, and then follow Him (19:21). By doing this, Jesus said the young man would have "treasure in heaven." To be rich toward God, this man would have to stop trusting in his riches and start trusting in God.

The Bible does not condemn being rich. Some people have thought that poverty breeds piety, but this is not necessarily the case. Sometimes those who are poor see

those who are rich and become so envious and jealous that their heart is eaten up with sinful attitudes. Spiritual wealth can come to people of all economic classes, even to the rich. Paul told Timothy how to instruct those who are rich with this world's goods. Why did he not tell them to do what Jesus told the rich young ruler to do? Their condition of heart was not necessarily the same as that of the rich young ruler. That man's problem was not that he possessed much but that he trusted in his possessions. No one who trusts in material wealth (whether they are rich or poor) can be right with God. Paul's instruction for those who are rich shows exactly what it means to be rich toward God:

Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not high-minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; That they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate; Laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life (1 Tim. 6:17-19).

As this passage shows, the key to being rich toward God is trusting in God instead of material wealth. When one can do that, then he is freed to use whatever he has to bring glory to God. The Lord owns all things (Psm. 50:10-12), and He has promised to supply us with all we need according to His riches (Phil. 4:19). Whether our needs are spiritual or material, God can and will supply. When we put our complete trust in that promise, then our resources are free to be used in His service. We no longer feel that we need to hoard what we have, lest we have to do without.

When churches can develop this kind of faith in God, then they become more able to do His work. Yet how many churches keep thousands of dollars in the bank because they are afraid the roof might blow off or the heating unit

might go out? Is God not greater than a leaking roof or a faulty heating unit? Smyrna was rich in God's eyes because of their great faith in Him. Churches today would do well to follow their example.

Problems of all sorts can arise in the local congregation. The Corinthian church is a good example of that. They had doctrinal problems, personal problems, problems of impurity, problems of division. Churches can have problems with false teaching, as did the churches of Galatia, among others. But Smyrna seems to have been free from these kinds of difficulties. Thus, a fourth quality in the Smyrna church is that they had nothing worthy of the Lord's criticism. Preachers often state that righteousness is not measured by the number of evil works a person does not do. Such reasoning is correct, for service to God demands actively doing good works, not just refraining from evil works. But the importance of refraining from evil must not be overlooked. The other churches of Asia (except Philadelphia) could not say with Smyrna that they had no qualities worthy of rebuke. That naturally hindered those churches in their service to the Lord. The energy they could have devoted to developing new areas of service to Him instead needed to be directed toward correcting some fault.

For churches to be free from qualities worthy of rebuke is no small task. Since the church is made up of people, and people are not perfect, there always is the potential for problems within the local congregation. In order to keep things as they ought to be in God's sight, the congregation must have elders who take seriously their charge to maintain purity. They have been given the responsibility of taking heed to themselves and to the flock (Acts 20:28-30). They, by sound doctrine, must exhort and convince the gainsayers and stop the mouths of the unruly and vain talkers and deceivers (Tit. 1:9-11). If problems

arise in the church, the elders must be responsible for seeing that those problems do not persist and that they are handled in the way Christ would want.

But the responsibility must be felt by **all** the members of the church. First, there must be submission to the elders' authority (Heb. 13:17). When the congregation shows the proper kind of respect and submission to the authority of the eldership, then many problems will never arise. In addition to that, every member must determine to stay away from sin in every form. We must "have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them," (Eph. 5:11) and "abstain from all appearance of evil" (1 Thess. 5:22).

Practical Lessons From Smyrna

In addition to the qualities worthy of imitation in Smyrna, there are several practical lessons which can be learned, and from which most congregations can benefit.

Material Prosperity Is No Sign Of Spiritual Condition

God's standards and man's standards are different; they always have been, and they always will be. Just as He said through Isaiah: "For my thoughts are not your thought, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (55:8-9). God views things differently from the way man does. So when men look at churches to determine their strength, they do not always look at the same things God looks at. To some, the evidence of a strong, thriving, growing church is seen in the outward show of wealth. This seems to be the case with the "mega-church" movement. The bigger, the flashier, the more impressive the outward appearance, the greater the church is considered to be.

Unfortunately, some among churches of Christ seem to be buying into this kind of thinking. More and more churches are investing thousands, even millions, of dollars in extravagant buildings, gymnasiums, and other kinds of material projects. Some may consider smaller, poorer, rural churches as insignificant. But a church's spiritual strength is measured neither by the balance in its bank account nor by the extravagance of its building complex. Jesus knew that the church in Smyrna was strong, but there would have been few people in the city of Smyrna who would have considered that group of Christians to be anything worth noticing. Regardless of their material prosperity, churches can be strong and rich in God's eyes by remaining faithful to His cause.

The Lord Knows Our Works, Even If Others Do Not

God chose to preserve very few details about the work the church did in Smyrna. We do not know when or how the church was begun in that city. We know nothing about any of the significant events associated with the work there. We do not know any of the names of any Christians there. The Bible tells us very little about that church. Yet the Lord knew them. He knew everything about them and about what they did for Him.

Some congregations perform great works in the Lord's cause, and those works have far-reaching and well-known benefits. We ought to thank God that there are congregations with the talents and abilities to have such a wide impact in their work. But only a few congregations are able to be involved in works of that magnitude. Most churches' works are known by a much smaller circle of people. That ought to be no cause for discouragement to those congregations whose works are known by fewer people. The goal of our good works is to bring glory to God, and God is concerned with all men. So when a church

sincerely, diligently, and faithfully works to take the Gospel to the world, no matter how large or how small a portion of the world they are able to reach, God knows their work and is pleased. Whether most of the brotherhood knows about a congregation's works, God knows.

***We Must Choose Between
Faithfulness And Fearfulness***

The church in Smyrna faced some very difficult times. Jesus said they would suffer, be cast into prison, be tried, and have tribulation (Rev. 2:10). None of those things is pleasant. However, after this period of difficulty, the Lord promised to give them a crown of life. They had a choice to make; they could be fearful of those things about which Jesus warned them, or they could be faithful throughout their trial. In the choice they faced, we see the choice each of us faces. Fearfulness and faithfulness cannot coexist; one destroys the other.

On one occasion Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee with His disciples. In their journey, a violent storm arose which threatened to sink the ship. The disciples, fearing for their lives, went to Jesus, who was asleep, and waked Him, crying, "Lord, save us: we perish" (Matt. 8:25). Jesus reprimanded them, saying, "Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?" (8:26). What caused the disciples' fear? Their little faith did. Jesus implied that, if their faith had been greater, their fear would have been less.

Fearfulness paralyzes us spiritually. For fear of failure, or opposition, or being unpopular, we do nothing. But churches today need to make the proper choice and be faithful to the Lord. Elders often allow fearfulness to prevent them from leading as they ought to do. They may be fearful of the congregation's reaction when they present the plan of work for the coming year, and thus, instead of making a challenging plan which requires extra effort and

sacrifice on the part of every member, they decide to continue doing about the same as they did the year before.

Fearfulness often plays a part in how elderships handle church discipline. Some wayward member needs to be brought back to the Lord but has rejected all attempts to do so. The Bible plainly describes the actions which ought to be taken, but many times elders fear how that person's family or friends might react if they withdraw from the unfaithful brother or sister.

Preachers, too, can allow fearfulness to dictate their actions. Some may not actively preach false doctrine, but, because they fear losing a job or a friendship, they carefully choose what things they will preach and what they will avoid. But the faithful preacher must do as Paul did in Ephesus, where he declared "all the counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). Every member of the congregation faces this choice, too. Fearfulness prevents many from attempting some new area of service, or from talking to a friend about Christ.

The church in Smyrna faced severe persecution, even death for their faith in Christ. We face nothing of that magnitude in America today. The potential difficulties for us pale in comparison to the real dangers they faced. We may like to think that, if we were forced to decide between being faithful to the Lord and dying, we would choose Christ. That decision is easy to make when it is only theoretical. But what do the daily decisions we face say about what we really would do if we ever found ourselves in that situation? If we allow fearfulness to win out when only our friendships or popularity are on the line, what would we really do if our lives were on the line?

Conclusion

In His infinite wisdom, God has produced the Bible so that it contains not only straightforward teaching but also examples from which we can learn. By studying all of

the churches mentioned in the Bible, we can learn those things which we ought to imitate and avoid. The church in Smyrna shows us no qualities which we ought to avoid and several which we ought to imitate. May every congregation of the Lord's church strive to be, as Smyrna was, a working church which stands strong in the face of opposition, rich toward God, and free of unsound influences. Though we know very little about the church in Smyrna, we can take heart in knowing that the Lord knew every detail. And the Lord knows every detail of every congregation still today. The Lord's admonition to them to be "faithful unto death" was the key to their being approved of God, and it is still the key today.

Endnotes

1 E. J. Banks, "Smyrna," **The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia**, Volume 4 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994).

2 William Barclay, **The Revelation of John**, Volume 1 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959), pp. 89-90.

3 Ibid.

CHAPTER 16

Lessons From The Church At Philadelphia

Daniel Cates

Introduction

ACCORDING TO *REVELATION 1:11*¹ John was told by Jesus to write a book describing the revelation that he would receive. Jesus told him that the letter was to be sent to “the seven churches which are in Asia.” While there were more than seven churches in the area, the number seven would serve as a symbolic reference to the whole church in that area.² The seven churches served to represent all congregations, in that some were without condemnation (Smyrna—Rev. 2:8-11; Philadelphia—3:7-13), some contained both commendation and condemnation (Ephesus—2:1-7; Pergamos—2:12-17; Thyatira—2:18-29), and some were without commendation (Laodicea—3:14-22); some were even dead (Sardis—3:1-6).

As an introduction to what John would write concerning the revelation he was (and would continue to be) receiving, Jesus Himself penned letters, through John, that would be sent to the churches through their angels, or messengers.³ It is the letter of Jesus to the church in Philadelphia with which this lecture is concerned.

To better understand the letter to Philadelphia, this chapter will note a brief history of the city of Philadelphia and the commendation from Christ of the church there. The chapter will then examine lessons that are applicable to the church today.

The City of Philadelphia

Philadelphia, now Alasehir⁴ or Alashehir⁵, was one of the easternmost cities of the province of Asia. In relation to the other churches of Revelation 2 and 3 it was Southeast of Pergamum (120 miles), Sardis (94), and Thyatira (79), East of Smyrna (104), Northeast of Ephesus (96), and North of Laodicea (21). It was 142 miles Northeast of Patmos, where John received the Revelation.

Geologically, Philadelphia and the area around it was subject to volcanic activity and consequently earthquakes. It earned the name “*Katakekaumene* which signifies ‘the burnt land’”⁶:

Because of its proximity to this volcanic area there was an abundance of hot mineral waters to which the sick from all over the Roman Empire came to bathe. For this same reason it was subject to frequent earthquakes...(after one such earthquake-DC) the Roman Emperor Tiberius extended to Philadelphia the same generosity he had displayed toward Sardis when he remitted all taxes and tribute and made a large contribution to its rebuilding.⁷

As stated, the city was destroyed several times due to that very thing⁸: “In A.D. 17 a great earthquake destroyed twelve cities of the Lydian valley, including Sardis and Philadelphia.”⁹ The scare of that earthquake caused many to flee the city, “while those who remained in the city in patched-up houses lived in constant dread of a recurrence of the shocks.”¹⁰ History teaches that this helped to enable the Philadelphians to avoid the worst of the Roman persecution, for Trajan, “bloody and evil as he was, had an unnatural fear of earthquakes and would not go near the city himself nor permit his troops to go.”¹¹ Over time, earthquakes have persisted as a problem in the area,

for “in 1969 an earthquake producing a surface rupture longer than 30 kilometers destroyed large parts of the town of Alasehir.”¹²

Politically the city was Hellenistic in origin and was situated at the point “where Mysia, Lydia, and Phrygia came together.”¹³ As time went on, it should be understood, everything was controlled from one place: Rome. It was under the Roman backdrop that all churches had to not only survive but thrive as well. “The city continued as a place of importance down to the Byzantine age...it withstood the Turks the longest, and did not fall until the close of the fourteenth century.”¹⁴ Over the years the town, currently in Turkey, has continued to be in a small way a strategic point: for example, in mid-June 1920, shortly after the close of World War I, the British-backed Greek army pushed a front against Turkey, “east from the agreed-upon holding line, and occupied an area from the old capital of Bursa south to Alashehir and East to Ushak.”¹⁵

Geographically, the city was of supreme importance. The location was originally chosen due to its prime location: “It was founded to spread Greek language and culture to Lydia and Phrygia.”¹⁶ “It was on a high hill (in the foothills of the Tmolus Mountains¹⁷-DC) overlooking the Persian Royal Road and the two important valleys of Ionia, the Hermuz (Gediz) and the Meander (Menderes).”¹⁸ Another advantage was its positioning “on the Cogamus River, a branch of the Hermus.”¹⁹ As “form follows function” in architecture, so with the city of Philadelphia founding followed function.

As for the city itself, historically it was founded, or built, by Attalus II (Philadelphus) between 159-138 B.C.²⁰ “The name came as the result of the devotion of one brother to another, that of Attalus II of Pergamum to his elder brother, Eumenes II, who had preceded him in the kingship.”²¹ Since the name meant “brother lover,” the city became the city of brotherly love—that is, Philadelphia.

“In 133 B.C. it passed with the dominion, in which it lay, to the Romans.”²² As a result of the benevolence of Tiberius in rebuilding the city after its destruction due to one of the earthquakes, the city took a new name, by its own choice. The name was Neokaisareia,²³ or Neocaesarea,²⁴ that is “Caesar’s new town.”²⁵ The new name was phased out around A.D. 42-50²⁶: “Under Vespasian the name of the city was changed again to Flavia, but the old name persisted through all attempts at change.”²⁷ Today the city

...still exists with a population of over 10,000. The city covers a considerable extent of ground, running up the slopes of four hills. The country as viewed from these hills is extremely magnificent. Gardens and vineyards surrounding the town present one of the most beautiful plains in Asia. The spacious town is miserably built and kept; the dwellings unsightly and the streets filthy.²⁸

Industrially, the city was given to the production of grapes, and so it was only fitting that the god of wine, Bacchus (the Greek name), or Dionysius (Roman), would be honored there.²⁹ The city itself was referred to as “Little Athens” “due to its many temples and public buildings.”³⁰

Religiously, it is evident that the city was given to idol worship. However, there was also a synagogue of Jews in the city, the subject of which will be noted later. As for the Lord’s church, it was likely established “sometime during the days of the Missionary Journey’s (sic) of the Apostle Paul, A.D. 45-58.”³¹ Little is known concerning the church there other than that which is seen in Revelation 1 and 3. However, “Within twenty years from the time of this letter Ignatius (A.D. 30-107) wrote to the Philadelphians warning them in vigorous terms to beware of such (false-DC) teachers.”³²

Commendation From Christ

The term “commendation from Christ” well describes the letter to the Philadelphians. As one of two churches about whom or for whom there was no condemnation, the church at Philadelphia can serve as a great example for churches in all ages. With this in mind, let us take a closer look at the letter to the Philadelphians.

Revelation 3:7 reads:

And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write; These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth.

Here is the heading of the letter. Christ is showing His nature and His authority. The holiness of Christ is unmatched. The Scriptures declare in Acts 3:13-15 concerning His death:

The God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, the God of our fathers, hath glorified his Son Jesus; whom ye delivered up, and denied him in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let him go. But ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you; And killed the Prince of life, whom God hath raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses.

The faithful departed saints are pictured in heaven singing

the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, Great and marvelous are thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true

are thy ways, thou King of saints. Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name? for thou only art holy: for all nations shall come and worship before thee; for thy judgements are made manifest (Rev. 15:3-4).

The power of God (and the authority as well) is shown in the phrase “he that hath the key of David” (3:7). Only Jesus, holy and true, has the power or the authority to open or shut on any matter religious. And only those to whom He gives such authority can enforce what He has established:

And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven (Matt. 16:19).

Revelation 3:8 reads, “I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name.” Just as Philadelphia was an open door for the Hellenists, it was an open door for the Romans and eventually the Greeks of the twentieth century. It is appropriate then that Jesus should use the same picture in describing what that church meant to the surrounding areas. The church at Philadelphia was a church through whom missionary efforts could be extended. They were literally an open door or gateway to aid in the spread of Christianity in the first century.

Just as no man could shut anything that Jesus opened doctrinally, so no man could close this door of opportunity that Jesus had opened. That the Philadelphians had a little strength could mean a number of things, but, as when David fought Goliath, when God is

on the side of any, size does not matter. How comforting it is to recognize the principle found in 2 Corinthians 12:9 that reads, “His strength shall be made perfect in our weakness.” It is conjectured by numerous sources that they may have had a little strength in number, resources, or influence, but the important thing to note is that **the church, though of little strength, was not weak.** There is no doubt that some of the strongest churches of this day are ones that in men’s eyes have but a little strength.

The key to their overcoming their little strength is found in the next phrase—they had “kept my word.” This is reminiscent of the attitude of David in Psalm 119:11: “Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.” It should not be overlooked that among the graces (2 Pet. 1:5) that the Christian should strive to add is knowledge. Romans 10:17 ties faith to the hearing of the Word of God, and Hebrews 11:6 says that without the resulting “faith it is impossible to please” God. How important then was it that these Christians be recognized for keeping the Word? John 5:24 reads, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.”

Not only were the Philadelphians commended for keeping His Word, Jesus commended them because they had “not denied my name.” Matthew 10:33 stands as the perfect illustration of punishment for those who would deny Christ: “But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven.” This was part of the wrong which had been perpetrated against Jesus by the Jews, for Peter said:

The God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob,
the God of our fathers, hath glorified his Son

Jesus; whom ye delivered up, and denied him in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let him go. But ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you (Acts 3:13-14).

Jesus, in His letter, moved from this commendation to say:

Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee (Revelation 3:9).

The idea in the passage is that there were some in Philadelphia who claimed to be Jews but who actually were serving Satan. Such is true of any who are not wholly devoted to following God in the way that He has prescribed. Matthew 12:30 simply says, "He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad." While claiming to be Jews, God's "chosen people," these men were not Jews in God's eyes, but rather merely Judaizers who were doing more harm than good. Of spiritual Israel Paul wrote in Romans 2:28-29:

For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.

The phrase, "behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet," simply shows that they would, by the power of God, finally bow to the cause that they had rejected. Philippians 2:9-11 paints a similar picture:

God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The time will come when all will fall before the Lord, either by their own will or against it.

The love of God for the faithful is a love that transcends all love. If God would send His Son in love (John 3:16) to a nation that would ultimately reject Him, how much more would He love those who faithfully kept His Word and denied not His name? 1 John 4:8-10 speaks of the love of God and, consequently, of Jesus:

He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Revelation 3:10 reads, "Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth." There was a reward for those who remained faithful, and that is true even to this day. Often Christians are nearsighted, but the Philadelphians were, and all Christians should be, farsighted! "The hour of temptation" was a persecution that would providentially miss the Philadelphians. That Trajan would not even allow his troops to enter the city could likely be referred to in the text.

In Revelation 3:11, Christ wrote, “Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown.” That Christ would come quickly means that the age of persecution would not need to be endured for a great duration: “There are constant and continual comings of the Lord to aid His people and to judge the oppressing world.”³³ Many Bible people and nations can testify to the fact that some judgments come sooner than others, and more than that, “that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will, and setteth up over it the basest of men” (Dan. 4:17).

To hold something fast is to strengthen it or to hold it against anything that may try to knock it loose. The reward for holding fast is “That no man take thy crown.” This is an allusion to the words of Christ to the Smyrnans in Revelation 2:10:

Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.

Revelation 3:12 served as further encouragement to faithfulness:

Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name.

In the temple of Bacchus, or Dionysius:

When some citizen did some commendable act or service it was not uncommon to inscribe his name on the column of a temple. As the devotees of the temple came to worship their god they would see the name of the one they desired to honor inscribed on the column.³⁴

The Philadelphians would have been able to identify with the honor pictured here, and could know that others would see their faithfulness. Indeed, is this study (nineteen hundred years later) not about their name and about their faithfulness? They would actually be the column, and the names written on them would be of God, new Jerusalem (spiritual), and a new name. The “new name” also served as a symbol with which they could relate. What the new name was is not revealed, but it would certainly be an honor to have it written upon the column that was their faithfulness!

Revelation 3:13 is actually a phrase repeated numerous times in the New Testament (e.g., Matthew 13:9 and six other times in Rev. 2-3). It reads, “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.” Only those with the proper attitude will truly hear what they are taught. As in the parable of the sower, only the good soil would bear fruit (Matt. 13:1-9; 18-23). Matthew 13:16 shows that those who were being addressed there truly heard: “But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear.” This verse shows the role of the individual in his own salvation and firmly defeats doctrines, such as Calvinism, which teach that men have no control over their salvation.

Lessons Applicable To The Church Today

There are many lessons that can be gleaned from this study and applied to the church today. First,

faithfulness through all trials must be the goal of all Christians. Second, we must keep the Lord's Word to the exclusion of any and all manmade doctrines and must shun all who promote such (2 John 9-11). Third, we must understand that God is always in control, and judgment will fall on all who oppose Him.

The final lesson is really the theme of Revelation. The latter part of Revelation 14:13 reads, "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them." This is a common theme illustrated in the fact that all faithful Christians will be columns bearing the names of God, new Jerusalem, and the new name, the crown of victory not having been taken.

It is hoped that the churches of today would find upon self-inspection through the mirror of God's Word that they are most like the churches in Philadelphia and Smyrna, for these churches received no criticism, only commendation. What examples both of these churches are for the church of today. More than that, though, what a great example they are for the individual Christian of today facing individual problems and pressures.

Conclusion

When we read through Revelation 2 and 3, we are made aware of the spiritual conditions of the seven specific churches of Asia and the first century church in general. Some are commended, some are condemned. At the same time all are instructed, and all are offered a reward for faithfulness. May the church today, both collectively and individually, aspire to the same goal that drove her first century brethren.

Endnotes

1 All Bible references are from the King James Version unless otherwise noted.

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- 3 Ibid, p. 157.
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- 6 Marlin, p. 125.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Edward A. McDowell, **The Meaning and Message of the Book of Revelation** (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1951), p. 57.
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- 14 James LeFan, "The Church at Philadelphia," **Churches of the New Testament** (Fort Worth, TX: Fort Worth Christian College Bookstore, 1963), p. 149.
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- 20 Marlin, p. 125.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 J. L. Hines & V. E. Howard, **Howard-Hines Study of Revelation** (Texarkana, TX: Central Printers and Publishers, 1967), p. 23.
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27 G. B. Caird, **A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine** (Hagerstown, PA: Harper and Row, 1817), p. 51.

28 Hines & Howard, p. 24.

29 Robert R. Taylor, Jr., "Letters to the Churches--No. II," **Studies in the Revelation**, ed. Dub McClish (Denton, TX: Valid Publications, 1984), p. 113.

30 Ibid.

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32 Homer Hailey, **Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary** (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 153.

33 Hailey, p. 153.

34 Marlin, p. 127.

CHAPTER 17

Lessons From The Church At Ephesus

Ted J. Clarke

Introduction

WHAT A PRIVILEGE TO be speaking again on the great **POWER** Lectureship! The elders of the Southaven congregation continue to provide a valuable service to Christians everywhere by hosting this lectureship and providing some excellent resource material for further study on vital topics. As lectureship director, B. J. has put together some great lectureships, but none more needed than the one this year on “The Lord’s Church: Past, Present, and Future.” As a father, I am truly proud of the work B. J. puts forth in service to God, both in quantity and quality.

I am likewise honored to be able to speak on the Lord’s church at Ephesus. We will consider: (1) the location and cultural setting of the church there; (2) the establishment of the church in Ephesus by the apostle Paul; (3) the strengths of the Ephesian church; (4) the weaknesses of the church; (5) lessons for us in the present; and (6) what lessons we can learn to help the church prepare for the future.

Resources for our study will include information from secular histories and Bible encyclopedias for the location and culture in and around Ephesus, and the New Testament books of Acts, First Corinthians, Ephesians, First and Second Timothy, and Revelation.

F. F. Bruce, speaking on New Testament history, said, "Paul's Ephesian ministry, extending from the late summer of 52 to the spring or early summer of 55, was in many respects an important phase of his apostolic career."¹ It was from Ephesus, as a home base, that Paul, his companions, and the church in Ephesus evangelized all of Asia within a space of about two years (Acts 19:10).

Location

Ephesus was located as a large seaport city along the western coastal region of Asia, where the Cayster River empties into the Aegean Sea. The earliest evidence of settlement at Ephesus comes from a Mycenaean grave, dating between 1400-1300 B.C. Founded by Ionians, Greek settlers occupied the area from about 1000 B.C. to the time of Croesus (ca. 550 B.C.), the legendary, wealthy King of Lydia.²

By the time of the Persian Empire (ca. 500 B.C.), one of the most famous roads

radiating from the central capitol of Susa...was the Royal road from Ephesus on the Aegean coast to Susa, three months long, which was much traveled over the centuries by Greek ambassadors, traders, learned men, and captives of war.³

Croesus's wealth helped to build in Ephesus the Temple of Artemis, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, but this temple was supposedly destroyed by an arsonist (ca. 356 B.C.).⁴

The city fell under the successive rules of Alexander the Great, the Seleucids, and Pergamus, finally becoming a Roman territory (133 B.C.)⁵: "By this time it had outstripped its rival Miletus to become one of the most prosperous cities of the eastern Mediterranean."⁶

Culture

Government

Ephesus was neither a Roman colony, Roman franchise, nor a “Latin” town, but was among a few cities which called themselves “free,” meaning “their internal affairs were governed by their own laws.”⁷ When the furor occurred in Acts 19:23-41:

the town-clerk...was the most important Ephesian official, [who] acted as liaison officer between the civic administration and the Roman provincial administration, whose headquarters was also in Ephesus. The provincial administration would hold him responsible for the riotous assembly and might impose a severe penalty on the city. He therefore did his best to calm the assembly, and when at last he succeeded, he addressed them.⁸

Rome allowed “free cities” fairly broad powers to govern themselves and keep peace, unless they proved themselves unable to do so.

The theater in which the idol craftsmen and the disgruntled people of Ephesus met was an impressive structure, seating nearly 25,000 persons. This was the site for their “theatrical performances, for the regular meeting of the city’s ecclesia, and for city meetings in times of urban crisis (Acts 19:23-41).”⁹ There is no evidence that Paul spoke inside the theater, although he desired to do so (19:30-31). Besides the Christians who discouraged Paul from addressing the mob, Asiarchs, chief men of the cities in the province who were obviously friendly to Paul, sent Paul word that he should not attempt to address the unruly crowd. The Asiarchs were officials who oversaw and provided the public games to honor the idol gods and reverence the Roman emperor. The fact that they were in

Ephesus may signify that festivals or games were being conducted in honor of Artemis.

Religion

Paganism in the city was centered around the Ephesian Artemis, and Ephesus was the cult center of worship to this goddess:

Ephesian Artemis should not be confused with Diana of the Romans or Artemis of Greek mythology. The Greek Artemis was thought of as the daughter of Zeus and the sister of Apollo. In the heavens, she was Luna (the goddess of the moon); on earth, she was Artemis (the goddess of the hunt, with a bow in her hand and a hunting habit for dress); and, in Hades, she was Proserpine. Artemis of the Ephesians was a very different goddess—the same as Cybele, the mother-goddess, the nurse of all, a fertility goddess. A statue of the goddess represents her as a many-breasted female figure with arms extended in a gesture of welcome or invitation; from the waist down, her legs are wrapped in cloth much like an Egyptian mummy, and this is covered with tier under tier of heads of lions, stags, oxen, bees, flowers, and corn. At Ephesus, her worship was presided over by a chief priest called *Megabyzos* and a body of priests called *Essenes* (king bees). The priestesses were even more numerous and were called *Melissai* (honey bees); they were divided into three classes: *Mellierai* (those about to become priestesses), *Hierai* (priestesses), and *Parierai* (ex-priestesses). The worship was orgiastic, accompanied by frenzied dancing and ceremonial prostitution, and other abominations, among which often was human sacrifice.¹⁰

Astrology, the belief that the movement of stars, planets, sun, and moon control the fate of mankind, was also prominent in Asia and Ephesus. People believed that these astral bodies were deities or disembodied spirits¹¹:

Astrology thus became closely connected with the other forms of popular devotion to the gods—the mystery cults and magic. The presence of the zodiacal images on large numbers of statues and monuments of pagan worship confirms this association with the mystery religions. A beautiful marble cult statue of the Ephesian Artemis dating back to the second century A.D., for example, depicts the female goddess wearing the signs of the zodiac as a necklace. It is likely that this artistic rendering was a method of portraying Artemis as having power and authority over those astral signs. The goddess Artemis might therefore benevolently exercise her control over those forces for the good of her devotees.¹²

No fewer than eighteen gods and goddesses have been documented to have been worshiped in Ephesus, according to finds in literature, coins, epigraphy, and monuments.¹³ Christians often faced charges of being atheists because they did not worship the popular local gods and state gods prominent in Grecian and Roman cultures.¹⁴ Remember that one of the charges made by Demetrius the silversmith was that “Paul persuaded and turned away much people (from the worship and veneration of idols, TC), saying that they be no gods, which are made with hands” (Acts 19:24-26). Demetrius seemed worried primarily about his financial loss, “but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis should be despised, and her magnificence should be destroyed, whom

all Asia and the world worshippeth” (v. 27). Demetrius stirred the emotions of the people till “they were full of wrath, and cried out, saying Great is Artemis of the Ephesians” for about two hours (vv. 28-34). The town clerk calmed and dismissed the mob after suggesting to them that their beliefs in Artemis were secure, saying, “[W]hat man is there that knoweth not how that the city of Ephesus is temple-keeper of the great goddess Artemis and of the image which fell down from heaven” (v. 35). The image which fell from heaven is believed to be a meteorite, perhaps roughly shaped as a multi-breasted female figure. Objects which fell from the sky were thought by pagans to be signs from the primary god Zeus (Greek) or Jupiter (Roman).¹⁵

Morality

The lack of Biblical morality among the common people of the Greco-Roman period makes their manner of life sound very much like that of those outside of Christ today. Ferguson notes there was a “separation of religion and ethics in Greco-Roman paganism...Cultus [religion] had little to do with morality except in cases of grave offense, and [pagan] priests did not function as moral guides.”¹⁶

Passages such as Romans 1:18-32; 1 Corinthians 6:9; Galatians 5:19; and Colossians 3:5 demonstrate that there were several words in the Greek language for the common man and, in the New Testament, that were evidence of a preoccupation with sexual practices by the pagans of Paul’s day.¹⁷ Homosexuality was common in Greco-Roman society:

Some of the greatest names in Greek philosophy regarded it as not inferior to heterosexual love, but it was practiced primarily (but not exclusively) among males between their early teens and early twenties.¹⁸

Prostitution was a recognized social activity and practiced through the fertility cults of Asia Minor, et al. It was also a part of religious devotion to certain deities.¹⁹

Marriage, with a home of husband, wife, and children, was the basic unit of society in Greco-Roman times, but extramarital relationships were common and easily available. Divorces were just as easily obtained, often with no more than an oral or written notice of withdrawal of one's consent to be married.²⁰

Entertainment

The **theatres** portrayed man as a mortal and frequently acted on the maxim of "let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die" (cf. 1 Cor. 15:32): "[M]uch of the popular amusement acting descended to the vulgar and sexual to get its laughs. The immoralities exhibited on stage became a common subject of criticism."²¹ **Athletic games** were some of the same common track and field events popular today, plus a type of "mortal combat" with nothing but biting and gouging prohibited. Greek athletics were practiced in the nude. Roman interest in sports tended more toward gladiatorial combat, which drew huge audiences with man against man, man against animal, or animal against animal. The **circus** was an area set up for chariot racing, which was "the major professional entertainment in Roman times...Business firms supplied the horses, chariots, and drivers. Charioteers were able to acquire huge sums of money and become popular heroes."²²

Sex, violence, and death-defying feats were the entertainment fare of the day. It seems not much has changed in two thousand years. The people of the world are still producing the same kinds of things for the entertainment market, but perhaps there are as many Christians that have become frequent customers as those

of the world. Movies and television focus on self, sex, violence, and special effects in this present, but temporary, life. Athletic games promote the body's abilities to the neglect of spiritual exercise and strength. Near nudity is common in some sports. The likenesses of the circus sport of chariot racing to present-day automobile racing have forced me to reconsider my fondness for both NASCAR and Indycar racing. Entertainment itself is not wrong, but it can obviously be cast in forms that are not proper for the Christian to support or view.

Jews

In many of the places Paul evangelized, there was an element of Judaism to which he first turned. This enabled him to have an audience which agreed with him about the one God and much of the morality set forth in the Law of Moses (which was restated in the New Testament). That Ephesus had a Jewish synagogue is evident (Acts 18:19-21), for Paul preached there “and spake boldly for the space of three months, disputing and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of God” (19:8).

However, when the Jews there opposed the Gospel and “spake evil of the Way,” Paul moved to a school building of Tyrannus and taught there daily for two years (vv. 9-10):

There was a large colony of Jews at Ephesus, and the privileges granted them in 44...by Dolabella (a partisan of Julius Caesar, and Roman consul in that year) were subsequently confirmed by the city authorities and by the Emperor Augustus (cf. Josephus, **Antiquities**, xiv. 10.12,25; xvi.6.2, 4.7).²³

Apollo's work (Acts 18:24-28): How many Jews obeyed the Gospel in Ephesus we do not know, although

the first disciples were Jews (19:1-7). More were undoubtedly converted during Paul's two-years-plus stay at Ephesus, since "all they that dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks" (vv. 8-10). Paul's references in Ephesians to originally Old Testament material likely indicate some Jewish Christians in his audience (Eph. 5:31; 6:2-3; cf. Isa. 57:19 with Eph. 2:12-17; Psm. 68:18 with Eph. 4:8): "It is difficult to believe that even by the end of the first century, if Ephesians is as late as that, there were churches in which there were no Jewish Christians."²⁴

Gentiles

One commentator writes: "A further question that arises (regarding Ephesians, TC) is why the writer apparently only addresses Gentile Christians."²⁵ While the text of Paul's letter to the Ephesians does seem to be material directed primarily to Gentile Christians, it is not exclusively so. The very text of Acts 19:23-41 shows that many of the Ephesian converts were formerly Gentile worshipers of Artemis. Luke quotes the idol craftsman Demetrius as saying, "Paul hath persuaded and turned away much people (from idol worship), saying that they be no gods, which are made with hands" (v. 26). Accordingly, many of the converts to the Lord's church in Ephesus were Gentiles whose backgrounds in polytheism and immorality could be dangerous to the church community unless they were thoroughly converted and educated regarding the one true God and His commandments for holy living.

Ephesus was the largest city in Asia Minor, probably consisting of over 250,000.²⁶ While the first temple of the imperial cult devoted to emperor worship was built in Pergamum in honor of Rome and Augustus Caesar (ca. 29 B.C.), Ephesus was the main commercial center of Asia²⁷ and afforded the best opportunity for Paul and company to evangelize the province:

Ephesus was surrounded by 230 independent communities within the Roman province of Asia. If the Christian faith were to be firmly established in the capital city, it could then be spread from the hub to the rim.²⁸

Ephesus was ranked with Rome, Alexandria, and Syrian Antioch as one of the greatest and most influential cities in the Roman Empire.²⁹

Power And Magic In Ephesus

Many aspects of the teaching of Ephesians about divine power and supernatural spirits seem particularly appropriate for people who have come to Christ from a background of involvement in magical practices.³⁰

The account of events in Acts 19:11-20 is all the more amazing in view of the thinking of the common Gentile in Ephesus and the New Testament world. "Magic" in the New Testament world is not what we think of when we hear the word today:

Belief in gods, demons, spirits, and various other forms of supernatural powers was a prominent characteristic of the first-century A.D. world view. Through the widespread practice of magic, one could find protection from this realm and even control it...In the world of Paul's time, magic was not a form of entertainment consisting of the skilled use of illusory tricks. It was far more serious and corresponds closely with what we might today call sorcery, witchcraft or the occult. Magic was based on the belief in supernatural powers which could be harnessed and used by appropriating the correct technique.

Magic can therefore be defined as a method of manipulating supernatural powers to accomplish certain tasks with guaranteed results. Magicians would not seek the will of the deity in a matter, but would invoke the deity to do precisely as they stated.³¹

One source of magic was “the Ephesian Grammata,” sometimes called the “Ephesian Letters.”³² These letters are not to be confused with the apostle Paul’s writings to the Ephesian church nor the letter by Christ to that church in Revelation 2:1-7. The “Ephesian Grammata” were written magical spells including one or more of the six magical terms within them. Clement of Alexandria and Hesychius identify the Greek terms as *askion*, *kataskion*, *lix*, *tetrax*, *damnameneus*, and *aisia*³³:

The letters (or names) seem to be laden with apotropaic power, that is, in the warding off of evil demons. They could be used either as written amulets or spoken charms. Anaxilas makes reference to those “wearing fine Ephesian charms in little sewed bags.” Plutarch relates that the “magi” instructed those possessed to repeat to themselves the magic words in order to drive the demons out (Plut., *Quaest. Conv.* 7.5)...It is difficult to determine how the Ephesian Grammata came to be affiliated with Ephesus. The most likely suggestion is that the six words were closely connected with the Ephesian Artemis.³⁴

With the proper formula or name(s), spoken or written, those who were steeped in belief of the power of the unseen spirit world of gods and demons, good and evil, believed they could force these spirit beings to do their bidding. These spells or formulas were used to win a lover

or some other good fortune, to heal one from a spirit-induced illness, or to curse another. See examples below:

I conjure you up, holy beings and holy names; join in aiding this spell, and bind, enchant, thwart, strike, overturn, conspire against, destroy, kill, break Eucherius the charioteer, and all his horses tomorrow in the circus at Rome. May he not leave the barriers well; may he not be quick in the contest; may he not outstrip anyone; may he not make the turns well; may he not win any prizes...may he be broken; may he be dragged along by your power, in the morning and afternoon races. Now! Now! Quickly! Quickly!³⁵

I adjure all ghosts (Greek *demonas*) in this place to come to the assistance of this ghost. Raise yourself up for me from the repose that keeps you and go out into every district and every quarter and every house and every shop, and drive, spellbind Matrona...that she may not have (intimate sexual relations) with anyone else, nor be able to go with any other man than Theodorus...and never let Matrona...be able to endure or be healthy or find sleep night or day without Theodorus.³⁶

Arnold summarizes “Magic and the Spirit world”:

1. Ephesus had a reputation for prolificity of magical practices. Since Ephesus was the leading city of Asia Minor, its influence in the sphere of magic very likely extended throughout the province.
2. Magic was primarily concerned with the acquisition of supernatural powers and the manipulation of the spirit world in the interest

of the magician. The magical papyri give us a rare insight into the beliefs and fears of the common people in the Hellenistic world.

3. Hellenistic magic is therefore quite relevant to our study in Ephesians. It was widely practiced in the area to which the epistle was written and it was chiefly concerned with “power” and supernatural “powers.”³⁷

Some of the types of magic presented above are illustrated in Acts 19:11-20. While God worked genuine miracles through Paul in Christ’s name, some Jewish exorcists, who had been attempting exorcism by names not given in the Biblical text, decided to try exorcism in the name of Jesus. Of course they had neither approval nor authority from God to do such (vv. 13-14). They did not truly **know Christ** but simply thought the power was in pronouncing Jesus’ name and Paul’s name, as they had used the names of other spirit beings. The result was both powerful and humorous, but not powerful in the way that the Jewish exorcists intended. The evil spirit responded that he knew Jesus and Paul but not the exorcists (v. 15). Following a severe beating by the demon-possessed man, the defeated exorcists fled the scene (v. 16).

When this became known to “all the Jews and Greeks also dwelling at Ephesus, fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified” (v. 17). The name of Jesus, which had brought such awe-inspiring healings when used by Paul, the apostle of the Lord Jesus (vv. 10-12), was not a name to use in trifling ways without His authority. The magnificent success of Paul’s use of Christ’s name was made even more significant by the misuse of the name of Jesus by these Jewish charlatans—so much so that many believers in Jesus were made, and these confessed their former practice of magic (v. 18). Bruce said the Greek word translated as “deeds” (KJV, ASV) in this

verse is “used here (v. 18, TC) in a technical sense of magic spells.”³⁸ He also commented on the exposure of the content of these spells and the “Ephesian Scripts (Grammata)”:

According to magical theory, the potency of a spell is bound up with its secrecy; if it be divulged, it becomes ineffective. So these converted magicians renounced their imagined power by rendering their spells inoperative. Many of them also gathered their magical papyri and parchments together and made a bonfire of them. A number of such magical scrolls have survived to our day; there are specially famous examples in the London, Paris and Leyden collections. The special connection of Ephesus with magic is reflected in the use of the term “Ephesian scripts” for such magical scrolls. The spells which they contain are the merest gibberish, a rigmarole of words and names considered to be unusually potent, arranged sometimes in patterns which were part of the essence of the spell, but they fetched high prices. On this occasion fifty thousand drachmae’s worth of such documents went up in smoke. (The public burning of literature as an open repudiation of its contents can be paralleled both from antiquity and from more modern times.) The powers of darkness were worsted, but the gospel spread and triumphed.³⁹

A. T. Robertson notes that the tense of the verb “burned” is “imperfect active” and signifies “burned them completely” up.⁴⁰ This was a public display, “before all,” and indicates that the strongest faith possible was exhibited by these converts to Jesus’ name and all that His name stood for (cf. Mark 8:38; Acts 3:6, 12, 16). Although many in Ephesus had made their living through the sale

of the magic spells in these books, the genuineness of their conversions was made obvious by their destroying these books, valued at 50,000 days' wages (Acts 19:19). The imperfect tenses of the verbs in verses 18-19 indicate that, after the events of verses 13-17, the Ephesians "kept coming, one after another," confessing and exposing their magical deeds, and kept coming to "burn up completely" their books of magic.⁴¹ The wonderful results of this continuing action (the believing by former practitioners of the magical arts) was that "mightily grew the word of God and prevailed" (v. 20). "Grew" and "prevailed" are also imperfect actives, meaning that God's Word "kept growing [spreading] and gaining strength. It was a [time] of triumph for Christ in the city of Ephesus, this city of vast wealth and superstition."⁴²

Technically, the practice of magic was outlawed by Rome, except for those practices connected with cultic gods sanctioned by Rome, "so long as it did not involve political or social crimes"⁴³:

There is no doubt that magical practices were flourishing in the first century A.D. Suetonius records that Augustus ordered two thousand magical scrolls to be burned in the year 13 B.C. The personalities of the Olympian gods had begun to wane as early as the fourth century B.C. and were soon replaced in popularity by magic and the mystery cults. This time also marked a rapid increase in astrological beliefs. The syncretism and strong belief in the influence of supernatural forces common to these three related traditions are reflected in the numerous Greek magical papyri extant today.⁴⁴

Artemis And Magic Practices

There can be no doubt that the events of Acts 19:11-20 led directly to the "great commotion about the Way" (v. 23,

NKJV). The continually decreasing interest in magic, indicated in verses 17-20, led to the turning away of “much people,” both “at Ephesus [and] throughout all Asia,” from the practice of idolatry and superstitious magical practices:

[T]here is a very close correspondence between the cult of the Ephesian Artemis and what we call “Hellenistic magic.” In many instances there seems to be little or no difference between calling upon Artemis to accomplish a certain task and utilizing a “magical” formula. Magic appears to be less a substructure of the cult of Artemis than it is an integral aspect of her “religion.” The “magical” aspects of her cult which I have highlighted would certainly not be viewed as unsanctioned or “illegal” as a part of the belief structure affiliated with her worship.⁴⁵

Since “**the name of the Lord Jesus**” was demonstrated to be **greater than all the gods or demons** named in the magical spells and inscriptions, the people did not need to buy spells, idol statues, or idol shrines to win the favor of these spiritual forces. The “silver shrines” that Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen made for Artemis brought them “no small gain,” but their occupations were being threatened by events like those described in 19:17-20. Whether these silver shrines were likenesses of the temple of Artemis (called the Artemision), statues of Artemis herself, or a combination of the two is unclear.⁴⁶ While no “silver” shrines of the temple of Artemis have been found, there have been numerous terra cotta ones, which the poorer devotees of Artemis would be forced to buy. The silver shrines would likely be melted down for money or other uses when owners ceased to be involved in the cult of Artemis.⁴⁷

The finances associated with the worship of Artemis were evidently more involved than the craft of the silversmith guild. This may be part of the information Demetrius used to incite his fellow workers and the mob in the theater at Ephesus to a near riot (Acts 19:24-34):

The influence of the Ephesian Artemis extended beyond the religious sphere into a domination of Asian life and culture. The temple wielded tremendous power through its function as a banking and financial center. Large amounts of money were deposited and borrowed from the Artemision. The cult also obtained a sizeable income from the large amount of property owned in the environs of Ephesus. After citing much inscriptional data in this regard, Oster concludes, "So through economic means the religion of Artemis became an indispensable pillar in the cultural structures and life of Asia, and was therefore a crucial factor in the lives of all individuals whom Christianity hoped to convert."⁴⁸

The apostle Paul had struck at the root of the Ephesians' pride when he said, as quoted by Demetrius, "They be no gods, which are made with hands" (Acts 19:26). Passages such as Isaiah 40:18-20; 41:21-24; 44:6-20; and Jeremiah 10:1-10, show that Jehovah God is the God of action, power, deliverance, knowledge and revelation, while the idol gods are nothing and can do nothing (Isa. 41:23-24; Jer. 10:5).

Other Old Testament passages show that, while the Jews recognized that the idol gods of the pagans had no concrete existence as real entities, the Biblical writers associated the worship of idols to the influences of the demon world upon humans on earth. In the Song of Moses,

just before Israel was ready to cross into contact with the seven pagan nations of Canaan (cf. Deut. 7:1-5), he prophesied of Israel's apostasy:

They moved him to jealousy with strange gods;
with abominations provoked they him to anger.
They sacrificed unto **demons**, which were no
God. To **gods** which they knew not, to new gods
which came up late, which your fathers dreaded
not (32:16-17, ASV, emp. mine, TC).

In the Psalms, the same thought is expressed. Israel "served (Gentile, TC) idols" and "sacrificed their sons and their daughters unto demons...they sacrificed unto the idols of Canaan" (Psm. 106:36-38). The Hebrew text of Psalm 96:5 reads, "for all the gods of the nations are idols," while the Septuagint text (LXX, Greek translation) says, "for all the gods of the nations are demons."⁴⁹ The apostle Paul likewise teaches that idol gods are truly "nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one...though there be [many] that are called gods" (1 Cor. 8:4-5). Later, Paul says to these same Corinthians:

What say I then? That a thing sacrificed to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? But I say, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons, and not to God: and I would not that ye should have communion with demons. Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of demons: ye cannot partake of the table of the Lord and of the table of demons (10:19-21).

Thus, there is no possible way for Christianity to reside in peaceful coexistence with idolatry! What happened in Ephesus must happen everywhere the Gospel

of Christ is taught: “for what agreement hath the temple of God with idols?” (cf. 2 Cor. 6:14-18). Some Christians may suffer in the clash of putting the name of Jesus above every name (Acts 4:12; 19:17,28-34). While there can be no compromise of teaching Christ, overall, good judgment must prevail to avoid unnecessary harm in dangerous situations such as that in Acts 19 (cf. vv. 30-31; 20:1).

Arnold summarizes the Ephesian Artemis cult:

1. The prominent and widespread cult of the Ephesian Artemis was closely linked with magical practices and beliefs. The devotees of Artemis feared the demonic realm, or the spirits of nature; considered their goddess more powerful than these forces; and thereby called upon her as their protector and deliverer.
2. Adherents to the cult of Artemis also practiced mysteries, perhaps similar to those performed in conjunction with Cybele. Artemis was also thought to have power superior to the astral powers, who were believed to control the fate of people. Thus, magic, mysteries, and astrological beliefs overlap and work in confluence in this cult.
3. The influx and expansion of Christianity eventually wrought the demise of the cult of the Ephesian Artemis. The Christians regarded the goddess herself as a “demon.”
4. Because of her strong links with the “demonic” realm, we would suggest that it is not an impossibility that the writer of Ephesians could have had the cult in mind when he referred to the hostile “powers.”⁵⁰

This is the first-century setting in Ephesus and most other locations predominantly influenced by Greco-Roman culture and Judaism. This is the climate that the apostle

Paul found in seeking to preach the Gospel in Asia, as he carried out his mission to convert the Gentiles.

Origins Of The Church In Ephesus

There were Jews from Asia who heard the Gospel of Christ when it was preached the first time (Acts 2:9). Considering the size of the Jewish population in Ephesus, we may reasonably conclude that Jews from there were present on Pentecost in Jerusalem. We do not know if any from Ephesus were converted and went back there to begin the church in that location. It is possible that Christian Jews settled in Ephesus when they were “scattered abroad” during the persecution in Acts 8:1-4.

We do know: (1) at the end of his second missionary journey, Paul stopped briefly in Ephesus on his way to Jerusalem and promised to return (Acts 18:18-21); (2) Apollos, a Jew who knew much about the Lord Jesus, but who only practiced John’s baptism, came to Ephesus and preached in the synagogue (18:24-25); (3) two Jewish Christians named Aquila and Priscilla, whom Paul had met in Corinth (18:1-3), were now at Ephesus and, upon hearing Apollos, taught him what was lacking in his understanding of Christ’s Gospel (18:26-28); (4) Apollos went to Achaia and became well-known to the Corinthians (cf. Acts 19:1; 1 Cor. 1:12; 3:4-6; 4:6; 16:12).

What did Apollos teach at Ephesus before being taught “the way of God more perfectly”? McGarvey notes that Alexandrian Jews were generally well-educated,⁵¹ and Apollos was said to be “mighty in the scriptures” (Acts 18:24). It is also said that he knew “only the baptism of John” (v. 25), which was not in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, nor did it promise the Holy Spirit to those baptized (cf. 19:1-5). We know that Apollos was “instructed in the way of the Lord” and “spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord,” but we do not know how

or who instructed him up to this point, nor do we know exactly what he knew of the “way” and “things of the Lord” (18:25).

Apollos could have known of John the Baptizer’s ministry and the ministry of Christ, both of which occurred some twenty years before the events of Acts 18:24-19:7. He may also have heard of a number of the prophecies which Jesus fulfilled in His birth and public ministry as the promised Messiah. These matters would not necessarily include his knowledge of Christ’s death, burial, resurrection, baptism in Christ’s name for the forgiveness of sins, the church which Christ established, etc. These latter “things” may well be those taught to Apollos by Aquila and Priscilla. The fact that he was better instructed when he left Ephesus for Achaia may be the point of 18:28: “For he mightily convinced the Jews, and that publicly, shewing by the scriptures **that Jesus was Christ.**” A full knowledge of the meaning of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ and the inspired teachings of the apostles since Pentecost must have been those things formerly lacking in Apollos’ preaching.

In Acts 19, the apostle Paul returned to Ephesus and found “certain disciples” who had been baptized with John’s baptism but had no knowledge (or incomplete knowledge) of faith in Jesus Christ and the giving of the Holy Spirit (vv. 1-3). When Paul explained the purpose of John’s ministry and baptism, pointing to faith in Christ and His work, “they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” (v. 5). Paul then imparted a miraculous measure of the Spirit to these twelve men (vv. 6-7). We do not know if Apollos had taught and baptized these men before he acquired a better knowledge of the Way from Aquila and Priscilla, or if this is merely a coincidence caused by the Gospel of Christ not having yet been preached in the entire world. One curious matter is the omission of Apollos having

been “rebaptized,” while these twelve who were baptized only with John’s baptism were immersed again, this time in Jesus’ name. McGarvey’s solution to this problem is, I believe, the correct one:

Paul explained, that John’s immersion was one of repentance, to be followed by faith in the Messiah when he should come. Those immersed by him believed that the Messiah was coming; but they did not, until after their immersion, believe that Jesus was the Messiah, nor did they have a promise of the Holy Spirit. They were not, therefore, immersed into the name of Jesus, or that of the Holy Spirit. This is further evident from the fact that Paul commanded these twelve to be “immersed into the name of the Lord Jesus,” which the authority of the commission requires us to understand as equivalent to the expression, “into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

These points of defect, however, were not peculiar to the immersion of these twelve, but attached also to that of the twelve apostles, the hundred and twenty disciples, and the five hundred who saw Jesus together in Galilee after the resurrection, none of whom were reimmersed.

What, then, led to the immersion of these parties? If their immersion had taken place, like that of all these others just named, while John’s immersion was still an existing institution, no reason could be given for their reimmersion. This, then, forces us to the conclusion that they had been immersed with John’s immersion after it had ceased to be administered by divine authority. Apollos had been recently preaching this obsolete immersion in Ephesus, and these persons may have been immersed by him. If so,

they submitted to an institution which had been abrogated more than twenty years, and this was the defect which led to their reimmersion. The general conclusion, from all the premises, is this: that persons who were immersed with John's immersion, while it was in lawful existence, were received into the Church of Christ (sic) without reimmersion. But persons who were thus immersed, after the introduction of apostolic immersion, were reimmersed. The reason why Apollos was not reimmersed as well as the twelve, was, doubtless, because, like the apostles and the other original disciples, he was immersed during the ministry of John.⁵²

We are not told by Luke, the author of Acts, how to blend the previous visit of Paul to Ephesus (Acts 18:19-21); the work of Apollos, Aquila and Priscilla (18:25-28); and the twelve "disciples" Paul found there, into a full understanding of how the church in Ephesus began. Did Paul make converts in 18:19? Did Apollos baptize many in Ephesus with John's baptism? After he learned better, did he seek to find those improperly baptized? Did Aquila and Priscilla teach and convert any while they were in Ephesus? If so, why are they not mentioned? Did Aquila teach in the synagogue or just instruct privately? Why were the twelve disciples Paul found in Ephesus not taught better by Aquila and Priscilla before Paul came? Had Aquila and Priscilla temporarily left Ephesus before Paul returned (cf. 1 Cor. 16:19)? Who, besides Paul and the twelve, formed the core of the Ephesian church? While these questions evade positive answers, we know much of Paul's ministry in Ephesus from Acts chapters 19 and 20.

Paul's Ministry At Ephesus

Acts 19: While we previously discussed much of this chapter, we will sketch some of Paul's activities. Paul

“spoke boldly” in the Jewish synagogue for three months, reasoning and persuading the Jews there about “things concerning the kingdom of God” (19:8). This shows that Paul taught that the Gospel was more than Christ’s death, burial and resurrection. In Acts 13, Paul taught the Jews and Gentiles about Christ and eternal life (vv. 23-33, 46-48). In Acts 14, he spoke of faith, tribulation, the kingdom of God, and the leaders in the church (vv. 22-23). In Acts 16, he preached on faith and baptism (vv. 14-15, 31-34). In Acts 17, Paul taught about Jesus as the promised and risen Christ (vv. 2-3), and he also spoke on the one God, repentance, judgment, and resurrection (vv. 23, 30-31). In Acts 18, Paul discoursed on faith in Christ and baptism (v. 8). Preaching about all these matters, and more, is essential to preaching the Gospel message. The accounts in Acts list a number of things which Paul taught, but none to the exclusion of others. When he taught about “the kingdom of God,” he taught about the other things Luke listed in the various accounts also. When he taught of Jesus being the Christ, he also taught about the kingdom of Christ’s church (cf. 2:30-47), faith, and baptism into Christ (cf. Acts 8:30-39; Mark 16:16).

When the Jews of the synagogue showed themselves hardened and “disobedient” (Acts 19:9, ASV), Paul did not allow discouragement to hinder his work of preaching. He used the opportunity that presented itself to teach the Gospel daily in a school, which he probably rented for that purpose. Notice, too, that Paul “separated the disciples” from the opposing influence of the synagogue, not willing to subject their minds to the false teaching of those who reject elements or the whole of the Gospel message. Some Jews, for example, were willing to be Christians if they could mix Christianity with the Law of Moses and bind these things on others (cf. 15:1-29). Paul said of such teaching, “To whom we gave place by subjection, no, not

for an hour; that the truth of the gospel might continue with you” (Gal. 2:5). This teaching by Paul in the school of Tyrannus “continued by the space of two years, so that all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:10).

We previously dealt with how the great miracles God worked through Paul propelled the work, showing those in Ephesus who believed in magic that the name and power of Jesus is greater than any supposed god or evil spirit (vv. 11-20). The “bold” declaration of God’s Word was clear to those who heard, and many turned from idols to serve the living God and His Son (cf. 1 Thess. 1:9-10).

Acts 20: Though Paul left his three-year work in Ephesus (vv. 1,31), he still had something vitally important to do in admonishing the Ephesian elders (vv. 17-38). In this chapter, we learn much more about Paul’s work in the church at Ephesus and the things he deemed crucial in the work of all churches.

First, consider the conduct of Paul among the church. He was humble, compassionate, and social (vv. 19-20). He was dedicated and willing to sacrifice his own life for others (v. 24). Paul was also selfless in his secular and spiritual labors, willing to physically support himself and the needs of others (vv. 33-35).

Second, consider the importance Paul placed on the elders of the Lord’s church and the responsibilities given to them. This chapter of Acts clearly shows that “elders” (v. 17), “pastors/shepherds,” and “overseers” (v. 28) refer to the same group of men. The elders were charged with first keeping themselves sound and holy, and, second, with overseeing the church, providing spiritual food, protection, and care (v. 28). **Paul especially put the elders on “watch” to guard against covetous men and false teachers who would destroy the flock or lead them astray** (vv. 28, 31). Think of it, brethren. Paul placed elders

of the church in Ephesus in charge of watching over and caring for the church among whom he had labored for three years. **The qualifications and responsibilities of elders are one of the most crucial matters in any generation of the Lord's church, and perhaps one of the most neglected or ignored!** See Ezekiel 34 for God's perspective on shepherds who abuse or neglect their duties to God's flock.

Third, consider the emphasis Acts 20 places on the Lord's church. Paul mentions "elders of the church" (v. 17), "the kingdom of God" (another descriptive designation of the church, v. 25), and "the church of God" ("church of the Lord," ASV, v. 28). The church is the "purchased" possession of God through the price paid—"with his own blood." Consider also the emphasis of Paul's statement to the Ephesians that "Christ loved the church, and gave himself for it" (Eph. 5:25). How dare anyone belittle the church of Christ!

Fourth, consider the content of Paul's preaching. He boldly and plainly says, "I shrank not from declaring unto you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly, and from house to house" (Acts 20:20, ASV). In verse 27 he states, "For I shrank not from declaring unto you the whole counsel of God." Paul taught the "whole counsel of God" publicly and from house to house. He was not ashamed to say publicly what he taught privately. There was no difference, for he was neither afraid nor two-faced. The church in Ephesus was never left to guess at God's will, for Paul preached all that God revealed. Because Paul so preached, he could say he was "pure from the blood of all men" (v. 26). None of the Ephesians could blame Paul for failing to tell them what they needed to know to be saved. Paul's admonition to Timothy was, not to "fear," but to "preach the word," even when some "will not endure sound doctrine" (2 Tim. 1:7; 4:1-5).

Fifth, notice a **significant part** of Paul's ministry must have been given to what some today would call "negative preaching." Paul told the elders of the church to "Take heed...and therefore watch, and remember" (Acts 20:28,31). Robertson says "take heed" means to "hold your mind on" the object(s) mentioned, and he simply defines "watch" as "stay awake."⁵³ Paul warned of the need to look out for "false teachers," whom he classed as "grievous wolves" (v. 29). The Lord warned of "false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves" (Matt. 7:15). Also, Paul warned that false teachers "speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples" would emerge, even from within the elderships of the church (Acts 20:30). This is what Paul told the elders to look out for, but how did he handle such matters when he was living in Ephesus and working among the church there? He answers, "**Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears**" (v. 31).

Sixth, notice that Paul, after giving these exhortations to the Ephesian elders, directs them to the **food** of which they are to partake and provide for the church they shepherd—which is "God, and the word of his grace" (v. 32). Again, McGarvey's comments are so appropriate:

It was a fearful responsibility which rested on the shoulders of these men, to watch as shepherds for the flock, and realize that only by fidelity like that of Paul, could they be free from the blood of them all. In leaving them to this work, he directs their thoughts to the only power sufficient to strengthen them to perform it, by commending them to God and to his Word, assuring them that the Word was able to build them up, and give them inheritance among the

sanctified. This is another among many proofs which we have seen of the confidence of the apostles in the sufficiency and power of the word of God.⁵⁴

Seventh, Paul's example of concern for the weak and his promotion of the blessing of giving over receiving was calculated to implant firmly in the elders of the church that "mind of Christ" which exhibited itself in concern for others above self (cf. Phil. 2:4-11).

Paul's Letter To The Ephesians

Although some contend that the epistle of Paul to the Ephesians in our New Testaments was likely a circular letter to the various churches of Asia,⁵⁵ since the church of Ephesus was one of those Asian churches, we will treat it as a letter from Paul intended for that church.

Space forbids more than an outlined view of the book of Ephesians as it relates to the church at Ephesus. Ephesians was likely written within ten years from the time Paul left the church there in approximately A.D. 55. Paul's two-year Roman imprisonment is usually dated between A.D. 60-64, and it was during this imprisonment Paul wrote Philemon, Colossians, Ephesians, and Philippians (cf. Eph. 3:1; 4:1).⁵⁶ Ephesians does lack the in-depth personal greetings one might expect from Paul to a church he had worked among with great intimacy—longer than any other church in his missionary journeys (cf. 1 Cor. 16:15-24, where Paul labored for a year and a half). However, the lack of personal greetings cannot detract from the Pauline flavor of Ephesians and may be what we might expect if the letter was intended as a circular letter to a wide number of churches in Asia.

While most of Paul's letters were written with a discernible purpose for a particular occasion, Ephesians

does not seem to be penned to correct any problems or false teaching or immorality in Ephesus, compared, for example, to the Corinthian letters, Galatians, or Colossians. However, Ephesians is an instructive tract for all Christians, particularly on the church as it relates to Christ and God's eternal purpose for man (Eph. 3:8-12). This is a significant theme already treated slightly in Acts 20:17-38. There are a considerable number of parallels in the texts of Colossians and Ephesians, which are too remarkable to suggest a different author.⁵⁷ Bruce shows the significant difference in the themes of these two books with the following comment:

Whatever be the literary relation between Ephesians and Colossians, Ephesians provides the logical sequel to Colossians, expounding the cosmic role of the church, the body of Christ, as Colossians expounds the cosmic role of Christ, who is head of his body, the church....⁵⁸

Chapter one of Ephesians presents the magnificence of Christ in relationship to His body, His church. Every spiritual blessing which can be obtained is in Christ, including redemption and forgiveness (vv. 3, 7). God has chosen "to sum up all things in Christ...the things in the heavens...and upon the earth" (vv. 9-10). God's "exceeding greatness of his power" and "working of his mighty power" on behalf of believers was at work "when He raised (Christ) from the dead and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places" (vv. 19-20). This exalted position is "**far above all** principality, and power, and might, and dominion" (v. 21, "rule, authority, power, and dominion," ASV).

Thus, God "put all things under his feet, and gave him to be head over all things to the church, which is his

body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all” (vv. 22-23). Whatever the Ephesians thought they needed that could be supplied by the idol gods and demon spirits they once worshiped and from whom they tried to gain favor, forget it—God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing we need in Christ! Whatever fears they had about the idol gods bringing curses upon them, the evil spirits allegedly possessing them and controlling their lives, or the powers of the sun, moon, stars, and planets governing their fates, take courage—Christ is superior to and has power over any and all other powers.

Chapter two of Ephesians explained to the Ephesian church that the death brought on by one’s sins was equal with walking “according to the prince of the power of the air” (v. 2), but that our gracious and merciful Father through Jesus has “made us alive together with Christ...raised us up with him...and made us to sit with him in the heavenly places” (vv. 4-6). This has effectively removed us from Satan’s power and placed us under Christ’s power in heaven. “In Christ” the power of Satan is broken, and he can have no claim to those who belong to Christ. This is God’s salvation by grace through faith (vv. 4-5, 8-9). All men, Jew or Gentile, are at peace with God and one another in Christ. No more worries about manipulating idol gods or spirits through enchantments, spells and astrological signs were needed (vv. 11-22).

Chapter three of Ephesians assures the church that the matters taught by Paul were revelations from the one God in heaven through His Spirit (vv. 1-5). When the church reads what Paul wrote, it has the same advantage and understanding of this former “mystery” as the apostle (v. 4). Christianity is not a mystery religion in the sense of needing secret ceremonies to initiate or advance converts to Christ, as in the pagan societies. When one reads Scripture, one learns what God desires for our

lives (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 3:18). Christianity is an open-Book religion open to all people. **Part of the revealed mystery is the fact that the church is an exhibition of God's wisdom, and, far from being an afterthought, as premillennialism teaches, the church is "according to the eternal purpose which he [God] purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord"** (Eph. 3:9-11). God had always purposed the church to be the New Testament demonstration of His kingdom of "fellow citizens" (Eph. 2:19; cf. Phil. 3:20; Col. 1:13); members of His "household...family" (Eph. 2:19; 3:15); and stones in His "holy temple" (2:21). This concept of **community** and body unity is essential to meeting one another's needs and for accomplishing God's work, giving one a sense of belonging, which is necessary to our happiness on earth. (cf. 4:16). God's exceedingly great power and glory in the church are affirmed again in 3:20-21.

Chapter four of Ephesians presents seven "ones" as essential to "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (vv. 1-4) and proclaims the exclusive nature of Christ's church in these matters. Where there is only "one" of a thing, a person has no choice (vv. 4-6). One has no choice of which body (church) to belong to, for there is only "one body." Likewise there is only "one Spirit" to lead us, only "one hope" to entertain, only "one Lord" to serve and obey, only "one faith" system to follow, only "one baptism" which is valid in God's sight, and only "one God and Father" over all and in all.

When someone leaves one religion for another, there is always the danger of syncretism. Syncretism is "the mingling of different religious beliefs through the influence of contact with other cultures."⁵⁹ God warned Israel about such practices in Deuteronomy 7:1-5; Solomon fell victim to it through his wives (1 Kings 11:1-8); the Jews tried to pervert Christianity and force the Gentiles to accept

elements of the Law of Moses (Acts 15:1-29); and Paul corrected the Colossian church for engaging in such (Col. 2:8-23).

Christianity is constantly being subjected to pressure to blend its exclusive doctrines with those of other religions (cf. Matt. 15:9). The temptations would be strong for Jews becoming Christians to bring over to Christ's covenant elements of the old Law and for pagan idol worshipers to impose on Christianity concepts of pagan thought believed to be effective.

Paul, in giving these seven "ones," effectively excludes syncretism as being part of the Christian system. To keep the unity of the Spirit and Christianity pure, these "ones" must be exclusively embraced (cf. Deut. 4:2; Prov. 30:5-6; Rev. 22:15-19). Ephesians 4:8-16 builds upon the concept of exclusivity in verses 4-6 by promising that the revelatory and confirmatory miraculous gifts Christ gave when He ascended to heaven would last until we come to "the unity of faith," where we are fully mature and capable of functioning without the miraculous helps. The church, mature and strong, is in view here:

When "the faith" was complete then the "knowledge of the Son of God" was fully revealed, and the church would reach its spiritual maturity as a "perfect man" in contrast to its present (in Paul's lifetime) infancy. The completed Scriptures are able to furnish us completely unto all good works that we "may be perfect" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).⁶⁰

Verses 17-32 demonstrate that Christianity is intended to be absorbed into one's total being, governing our personal moral character and the manner in which we conduct our personal relationships with others. We are made alive by Christ to be "new" people, altering our lives

in ways radically different from those in the world. Pure speech and thinking, with positive acts of love and kindness, are to characterize Christians.

Chapter 5 of Ephesians continues the theme of moral purity, emphasizing sexual purity and, not only calls upon us to “have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness,” but also to “reprove them” (v. 11, “expose,” NKJV). Verses 22-33 begin what is called a “household code,”⁶¹ based on the example of Christ. Indeed, Christianity is to enter the home and govern one’s conduct behind closed doors, as well as in public life. A wife is to submit to her husband “as” the church submits to Christ (vv. 22-24), and a husband is to love his wife “as” Christ loved the church (vv. 25-30). The “great mystery” of which Paul speaks is the revealed relationship of Christ and His church as husband and wife. Bruce says “what is” in view is “the relationship of life and love between Christ and the church,”⁶² which is to be mirrored in the earthly husband-wife relationship.

Chapter six of Ephesians continues the “household code,” with instructions for the behavior of children to be honoring their parents and the awesome task for parents in raising children “in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (vv. 1-4). Christians cannot become so busy that they neglect to develop the skills necessary to meet these family obligations set forth by God. When each family member fulfills his own responsibilities, these directions bring happiness and harmony into the home. Slaves were often part of the first-century extended household, so regulations for masters and slaves were also given.

The final section of Ephesians was a reminder to Christians that we **are** locked in an **ongoing war** against the Devil and his forces of evil (vv. 10-20). Verse 10 reminded the Ephesians that our ability to be **strong** is **in the Lord** and that through the **power** of **His might**

God equips us with full battle gear for both defensive and offensive combat (v. 11). Christians can “stand” against Satan, without fears, and be unaffected by his wiles (schemes).

The apostle reminds the saints that this is not a physical struggle with flesh and blood people, although Satan’s influence and schemes are directed against us through physical things and human agents. **The Devil is a real spiritual being**, opposed to God and everything that God says is good. He has power, but God has greatly limited Satan’s power from directly causing us to do evil. Someone has likened Satan to a vicious dog restrained by a chain; he can only go so far, which angers him even more. Jesus said that Satan is the “prince of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). To love the world (and the things in it) is to adore Satan (James 4:4; 1 John 2:15-17). The “lusts of the flesh and eyes and the pride of life” are Satan’s avenues to tempt us. He is often able to disguise himself so that we see pleasure in sin and not a foaming-at-the-mouth-mad dog (cf. Heb. 11:25; 2 Tim. 3:4; 2 Cor. 11:14-15).

Paul called the Devil “the god of this world (who) hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them” (2 Cor. 4:4). James 4:7-8 and First Peter 5:8-9 portray the Devil as real but helpless to have power over Christians who “watch out for him” and “resist him steadfast in the faith.” It is our “strength in Christ” which frustrates Satan’s designs on us. The fact that Christ overcame the worst Satan and his evil forces could do assures us that “in Christ” we, too, are strong enough to resist and overcome the worst Satan can do to us.

As the crucifixion of Christ approached, the powers thought they would finally kill God’s own Son and put an

end to His merciful saving purposes (1 Cor. 2:6-8). Christ's death and resurrection, however, uncovered the foolishness of their plans. E. F. Scott gives an eloquent explanation of this "exposure" in his comments on Ephesians 3:10:

The hostile powers had sought to frustrate the work of God, and believed they had succeeded when they conspired against Christ and brought about His Crucifixion. But unwittingly they had been mere instruments in God's hands. The Death of Christ had been the very means He had devised for the accomplishment of His plan. So it is here declared that the hostile powers, after their brief apparent triumph, had now become aware of a divine wisdom they had never dreamed of. They saw the Church arising as the result of Christ's death, and giving effect to what they could now perceive to have been the hidden purpose of God. Having thought they could destroy Christ, the powers were astonished to find Christ rising from the dead and assuming the position of "head" over a new body of people He was bringing into union with himself. The devices of the powers could now be seen as futile by all.⁶³

Although Christ was victorious over Satan, and Christians can resist any power Satan uses against them, the Devil is still the "god of this world" (2 Cor. 4:4), and "the whole world lieth in the evil one" (1 John 5:19). The battle still rages, and Paul informs us that God equips us for the battles of our everyday lives to be victorious over Satan's evil forces (Eph. 6:13). God reminds us that Satan is out there doing the best he can to "get us," even though God has limited his powers. But God says, "Look, Christian, put on the whole armor I have provided for you, add prayer and watchfulness, and I promise you Satan cannot get to

you. Believe me; trust me.” There is a real host of enemies and real danger, for we are at war. But we are wiser and stronger “in the Lord.” Arnold, speaking on Ephesians 6:10-20, portrays these close encounters of the evil kind:

In verse 12, the use of the word *struggle* describes a scene of conflict. In the first century this word was commonly used, not in the context of warfare, but as the typical term for the sport of wrestling. It even occurs on inscriptions in western Asia Minor in reference to the wrestling event of the various games held in the regional cities. As such, Paul probably used it to heighten the closeness of the struggle with the powers of evil. The use of the words *evil* and *darkness* also indicate the character of spiritual warfare.

The world rulers (*kosmokratores*) are depicted as ruling over “this darkness” and as being “evil.” The whole setting is cast “on the evil day,” which probably refers both to the fact that “the days are evil” (Eph. 5:16) and that there will be intense times of demonic attack. Finally, the devil is depicted in extremely vivid terms as launching flaming arrows at the church (Eph. 6:16).

The whole tenor of the passage is designed to convey the feeling of extreme danger. The danger posed to Christians by these organized powers of darkness can be overwhelming—left on our own. Christians, however, are not alone. They are united to the exalted Lord who defeated the forces of evil and now imparts His power and authority to the church.

Throughout the letter the apostle has emphasized God’s power and its availability to believers. This emphasis now reaches a climax when Paul says, “be strong in the Lord and in

his mighty power” (Eph. 6:10). He strung together three power-denoting terms (*endynamo*, *kratos* and *ischys*) that have a combined effect of bringing the almighty power of God into bold relief especially in contrast to the weaker powers of darkness. Paul further defined and clarified God’s power by specifying various ways God bestows His power on the church and by relating the means through which God’s enabling might is imparted. Paul enumerated seven spiritual weapons. Five of these are objective endowments from God (truth, righteousness, the gospel, salvation and the Spirit/the word of God) and two stress our responsibility (faith and prayer). Our responsibility is also implicit in the five gifts from God...While this list of spiritual resources (“weapons”) does not exhaust all divine bestowments available to Christians, it represents the essence of all that is vital to waging successful warfare against the powers of darkness.

The nature of spiritual warfare, as Paul portrayed it here, is primarily concerned with Christian conduct and spreading the gospel—not with exorcism or eradicating structural evil. The heart of spiritual warfare could best be summarized as resistance (to temptation and sin) and proclamation (of the gospel).⁶⁴

Surely, the church at Ephesus knew what it was to do battle with the “spiritual hosts of wickedness in heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12, ASV). They saw many victories during Paul’s ministry with them. Now he reminded them of the ongoing war and how to continue to be victorious soldiers of Christ against those evil forces. The church at

Ephesus (or anywhere) could be victorious only as long as they dressed in the whole armor of God to protect themselves. Wielding the Word of God as the sword of the Spirit, to defend (cf. Matt. 4:1-8) and to go on the offensive (2 Tim. 4:1-5), would allow them to “stand” with Christ as victors over all enemies.

Ephesus And 1 And 2 Timothy

While the events surrounding Paul’s trip to Macedonia and Timothy’s placement in Ephesus are too complex to deal with here, it seems that Paul wrote First Timothy from Macedonia to Timothy in Ephesus. Whether or not Paul had himself been back to Ephesus is not certain. He could have given this charge to Timothy by a letter or in person from another city. What is clear is that “certain men” were attempting to teach doctrine(s) different than Paul had taught the church there (1 Tim. 1:3, ASV; Gal. 1:6-9; et al.). It may well be that what Paul had warned the Ephesian elders about in Acts 20:29-31 had come to pass. Paul mentions two of the false teachers, Hymenaeus and Alexander, and reminded Timothy to “war a good warfare” (1 Tim. 1:18-20).

One should also note that Paul gave Timothy instructions for the roles of men and women in worship (2:8-15) and qualifications and duties for elders and deacons, relating to how “men ought to behave themselves in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of truth” (3:1-16). Undoubtedly, these were matters of needed teaching in Ephesus in order to halt and correct the errors of false teaching and practice connected with them. Behind these errors were some “giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of demons” (4:1). Timothy was to be bold in “commanding and teaching” and to be an example to others, with a view to saving himself and those whom he taught (vv. 11-16).

Paul again refers to the invisible spirit world in noting that some younger widows have “turned aside after Satan” (5:15) and that Timothy is to observe without partiality the various instructions received “before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels” (5:21; cf. 3:16; 1 Cor. 4:9; 11:10). In chapter six, warnings against corrupt teachers and materialism conclude the letter, with Paul again reminding Timothy that Christians are in a fight for eternal life and must continue to “Fight the good fight of faith” (6:12).

Second Timothy was written from Rome during Paul’s second imprisonment there (2 Tim. 1:8; 2:9; 4:6-8). Since Paul desired Timothy to come to him in Rome, he may have sent Tychicus to Ephesus to care for things while Timothy was absent (4:9-13). The war motif is repeated in this epistle. The beloved apostle noted that “all they which are in Asia be turned away from me,” and he named several who were responsible, such as Phygellus, Hermogenes, Hymenaeus, and Philetus (1:15; 2:17). Still, Timothy was to “be strong” (2:1) and to continue to teach others what Paul had taught to him (2:2). That may mean additional suffering as “a good soldier of Jesus Christ,” but one who goes to war must seek to “please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier” (vv. 3-4).

Among several admonitions given to Timothy to give to others, too, are those not to have a spirit of fear (1:7) but to be willing to suffer for Christ’s cause (1:8,12; 2:3,9-10,12; 3:11-12). He is commended to “handling aright the word of truth” (2:15, ASV) and to “continue in the things which thou hast learned and been assured of” (3:14), remembering “the holy scriptures which are able to make thee wise unto salvation” (3:15). These are the writings “inspired by God and profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness” (3:16). Scripture is given to man that he “may be perfect (complete,

ASV), throughly furnished for all good works” (3:17).

We do not know if Timothy reached Paul in Rome before Paul was executed by Nero Caesar,⁶⁵ but Paul’s parting charge was to be persistent in preaching the Word whether the time was favorable or not, including in the preaching “reproof, rebuke, and exhortation.” (4:1-2). Paul knew that apostasy flourishes where the Word of God is not spoken and repeated (vv. 3-4; cf. 1 Tim. 4:6). If the church in Ephesus, Asia, or anywhere was to continue, it depended on men like Timothy continuing to preach what he had learned from the inspired apostle and inspired Scripture (2 Tim. 4:5), for Paul would soon be dead (vv. 6-8). Paul had “fought a good fight,” run his race, and “kept the faith.” He asked Timothy to follow him by fulfilling his own ministry, and his reward would be the same crown of righteousness from the Lord (vv. 7-8).

Ephesus And The Apostle John

Tradition says that the apostle John resided in Ephesus in the latter part of his life. Leon Morris quotes the “church father” Irenaeus, commenting on the synoptic gospels, as saying, “Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who had leaned on His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia.”⁶⁶

Homer Hailey, in his commentary on Revelation, notes that Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 153-217) says “the apostle John...returned to Ephesus from the isle of Patmos...after the tyrant’s death” [Nero or Domitian?].⁶⁷ Remember that it was on Patmos that John wrote the book of Revelation (Rev. 1:9). An ancient church historian, Eusebius, also tells of the early “church fathers” writing of the apostle John’s work in Ephesus and Asia⁶⁸ and of his supposed death in Ephesus.⁶⁹ Lockyer gives what he calls a “probable” tradition regarding the apostle following his return to Ephesus from Patmos:

The most pleasing and plausible and probable tradition regarding the final days of John is that which affirms that he was carried to and from the Lord's Day services shortly before he died, being so feeble because of his 100 years that all he could do was to say the closing word to his disciples, "Little children, love one another." Thus he died, naturally, in the expectation of eternal blessedness, and was buried in Ephesus. The remarkable thing is that although the local traditions of Ephesus are so full of Paul, and Luke who was buried there, little is said of John as if to suggest that the old, quiet, and retiring spirit, which led him always to the last, and silent where possible, had continued there.⁷⁰

Although the Bible says nothing about John's final years in Ephesus, there are a number of "church fathers" with credible records who place him there. We can be certain that, as long as John lived, which some say was into the reign of Trajan beginning A.D. 98,⁷¹ he would have kept on teaching the same Gospel as the apostle Paul taught and encouraged Timothy to preach (cf. 2 Tim. 1:13; 2:2). What a blessing it must have been for the church in Ephesus to have had two great apostles living there and teaching at two different times.

Ephesus And Revelation 2:1-7

The last Biblical resource regarding Ephesus is an epistle from Christ written by the apostle John in the book of Revelation. Revelation is not just for the seven churches of Asia to whom it is addressed (1:9-11), but those seven churches are representative of the different stages of faith or apostasy which may exist in any congregation in any generation!

Each letter follows a similar pattern with (1) a salutation to the church addressed; (2) Christ's self-description, using one of the elements of John's description of Christ in chapter one; (3) the mention of whatever is praiseworthy of that church, though Laodicea had nothing; (4) the mention of whatever needs condemnation in that church, though Smyrna and Philadelphia had nothing; (5) any needed warnings and threats for unrepentant attitudes; (6) exhortations to establishing and continuing faithfulness; and (7) promised blessings and rewards.⁷²

The church at Ephesus is written to first, likely because it is the chief city of the province of Asia. In verses 2-3, Jesus speaks of His knowledge of and commendation for the church:

I know thy works, and thy toil and patience, and that thou canst not bear evil men, and didst try them that call themselves apostles, and they are not, and didst find them fake; and thou hast patience and didst bear for my name's sake, and hast not grown weary (ASV).

In these verses, Christ recognized the great work done in Ephesus through Paul (Acts 18-20), their response to Paul's letter to them (Ephesians), and their later work during the time of Timothy's ministry there (1 & 2 Timothy).

John may have been the last living apostle of Christ, and his residence in Asia would qualify him to receive this final Revelation from Christ and deliver it to those churches. The work of continually dealing with false teachers and the persecution which followed this type of watchfulness and action required patience and willingness to suffer for Christ's name sake (cf. John 15:18-21; 2 Tim. 1:7-8; 3:12). The church at Ephesus was perhaps, in one sense, a model of watchfulness and exposing religious error, for in this they had not "grown weary."

The church at Ephesus was also commended for hating “the works of the Nicolaitans, which I [Christ] also hate” (Rev. 2:6). We know almost nothing about this ancient group, unless the verses in 2:14-15 mean that they practiced fornication and offered sacrifices to idols as others who held to the teaching of Balaam (cf. Num. 22-25; 31:16). W. B. West said the Nicolaitans “were the followers of Nicolaus, a proselyte of ancient Antioch, who was a devotee of Balaam and Balak” (cf. Acts 6:5), but offers no documentation for his assertion.⁷³ So it appears that the church in Ephesus continued to expose false teaching and imposters, idolatry and sexual immorality.

However, there was something seriously amiss in Ephesus. Jesus said:

But I have this against thee, that thou didst leave thy first love. Remember therefore whence thou art fallen, and repent and do the first works; or else I will come to thee, and will move thy candlestick out of its place, except thou repent (Rev. 2:4-5).

It is difficult to know exactly what was the “first love” they had left. Many commentators claim it is a loss of love for Christ which should have motivated their service; many others say it is a loss of brotherly love, or for mankind in general. Doubtless, love for Christ, the brethren, and mankind in general is involved, but the condemnation involves some kind of “first works” which exhibited their “first love.”

There are several possibilities as to the meaning of a lost “first love” here. One view, held by many commentators, is that this refers to something like love lost in a marriage, when one’s love for Christ grows weak:

For them the spiritual honeymoon with their Bridegroom was over. Much like a wife or

husband who loses real love for a spouse and performs expected responsibilities for a marital mate out of a sense of stern, unbending duty, these people were patient laborers with hands still glued to the gospel plow (Luke 9:62). But the fervency of love was gone out of the glue. They had lost their love for service, for worship, for Bible study, for prayer and for soul winning. Loveless church members do not fit the Loving Lord, our Affectionate Advocate on high.⁷⁴

A second view is that Jesus is speaking of love lost for one another, the type of love for which they were formerly commended—“the love which ye show toward all the saints” (Eph. 1:15, ASV).⁷⁵ Think about the comments of Mounce and Caird below:

Every virtue carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction. It seems probably that desire for sound teaching and the resulting forthright action taken to exclude all imposters had created a climate of suspicion in which brotherly love could no longer exist...A cooling of personal love for God inevitably results in the loss of harmonious relationships within the body of believers. Jesus had made it clear that “by this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). Brotherly love was the distinctive badge of Christian discipleship, but at Ephesus hatred of heresy and extensive involvement in the works appropriate to faith had allowed the first fresh glow of love to God and one another to fade.⁷⁶ The one charge against the Ephesians is that their intolerance of imposture, their unflagging loyalty, and their hatred of heresy had bred an inquisitorial spirit which left no room for love. They had set out to be defenders of the faith,

arming themselves with the heroic virtues of truth and courage, only to discover that in the battle they had lost the one quality without which all others are worthless.⁷⁷

Brethren, is it not possible that some of us, who are trying to heed the admonitions of watchfulness and discipline Paul gave to the Ephesian elders and Timothy, are falling into the same condemnation as Ephesus in Revelation 2:1-7? We are rightly concerned with keeping the church pure, but must we sacrifice brotherly love upon the altar of sound doctrine? Some of what I have seen on the Internet, in personal correspondence, or in books written regarding present day problems seems to show a quest for sound doctrine minus the manifestation of brotherly love.

A third view of the loss of the “first love” which demonstrated itself in “first works” which the Ephesians need to “do” again, is evangelistic fervor, the love for lost souls. It seems clear that the very history we have of the Ephesian church, in Acts, Ephesians, 1 & 2 Timothy, and here in Revelation points to a **loss of the love for evangelism** of the lost as the “lost love” for which Christ condemned the church at Ephesus. In their zeal to oppose error, which is commendable and necessary, **they had focused on preservation without continuing proclamation.**

The apostle Paul led the way, but he did not single-handedly evangelize all of Asia (Acts 19:9-20). The church at Ephesus grew and had people of great faith who abandoned their erroneous Jewish and pagan ways, causing “no small stir about the Way” (v. 23, ASV). The sacrificial attitudes of many were shown in burning their valuable books on the magical arts, so that “the name of Jesus was magnified” (v. 17) and “mightily grew the word

of God and prevailed” (v. 20). It was because of the evangelistic efforts of Paul and the Ephesian church that strong opposition arose (vv. 8-9, 26-27). Paul’s last letter to Timothy also included several encouragements to evangelize (cf. 2 Tim. 1:7-8,13; 2:2-4,14,24-26; 3:14-17; 4:1-5).

Here, too, there is evidence that some of us have faltered. Have you or your congregation become so bogged down with defending the faith from false brethren within the church that you have lost the love for lost souls outside the church? Do we operate more in “a climate of suspicion” than in an atmosphere of seeking the lost? If so, would Christ say to the congregation where you worship, “Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent” (Rev. 2:5)? In this verse, Jesus implied that what was “lost love” can be regained, whatever that lost love may be.

Conclusion

Knowing the Biblical churches of the “past” is valuable because the revelation of God’s Word regarding their establishment and work informs us as to how the church of the “present” should or should not function. The required, prohibited, or optional matters of the church past, as recorded in God’s Word, are the things required, prohibited, or optional for the church of the present. Since God’s Word has been fully revealed (2 Tim. 3:16-17; Jude 3; Rev. 22:18-19), we can be sure that the same three broad areas apply to the church of the “future.” Noting that, we offer the following conclusions.

1. *Cities like Ephesus provide a good base of operations from which to evangelize* nearby communities, as well as broad-based missionary efforts in a country.

2. *Knowing the cultural background of a city or area can help one to focus on the cutting issues which most urgently need to be addressed*, such as the passing of Judaism or the nonexistence of idol gods (Acts 19:8,26).

3. *All preaching must give great emphasis to the power, authority, and majesty of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit over all other beings, fleshly or spiritual* (Acts 19:10-20). Men must be made to see that faith in Christ provides Christians with power to defeat Satan and all spiritual evil (cf. Eph. 1:3,19-23; 3:14-21; 6:10-20).

4. *The events at Ephesus show that the elements associated with one's baptism matter*. People with any baptism other than the immersion in Christ's name (Acts 19:4-5), in order to have one's sins washed away (22:16), cannot be accepted as Christians. Paul was not willing to compromise this doctrine at Ephesus, and he preached the same Gospel everywhere he went, as he instructed Timothy to do (1 Tim. 1:3; 4:11; 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:13; 2:2).

5. *Our preaching must be characterized by both "boldness" and "love"* (Acts 19:8-10,26; Eph. 4:15). We must try to evaluate where people are in their religious thinking and tell them the truths they need to hear with a love for their lost souls. One need never fear, apologize, or be embarrassed for preaching what God's Word teaches (2 Tim. 1:7; 3:16-4:5), but one might have to apologize for not "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15).

6. *Our preaching must also involve "the whole counsel of God...[and] everything profitable" for mankind to hear* (Acts 20:20,27). We cannot baptize people properly, later find out they are living in adultery, and refuse to teach them that the consequences of such sin will be eternal condemnation (cf. Eph. 5:1-7,11). Elders or congregations must not tolerate preachers who refuse

to preach all of God's Word, rightly dividing it (2 Tim. 2:15; 4:1-5).

7. *We must place the proper emphasis upon the eldership as the shepherds of God's flock, to feed, care for, and protect against false teachers within and without the Lord's church* (Acts 20:17,28-31). The "flock" belongs to God; the elders are to serve God in shepherding the flock, which is an awesome responsibility (20:28). If the elders do not meet the qualifications Paul sent to Timothy when he was in Ephesus (1 Tim. 3:1-7; cf. Tit. 1:5-9), or if they do not carry out their duties as given in those passages (Acts 20, et al.), they should resign or be removed from office.

8. *We must continue to emphasize the glory and purpose of Christ's church in God's eternal plan* (Eph. 3:8-11). Christ's blood purchased the church (Acts 20:28); Christ is the Head of the church, which is His body (Eph. 1:21-23); and Christ is Savior of the church, His body (5:23). The church is Christ's bride and should wear His name (Eph. 5:22-33; cf. John 3:28-30).

9. *We must continue not to grow weary in warning the church locally and universally about doctrines and men who pose a threat to its faithfulness and security* (Acts 20:29-31; 1 Tim. 1:3,18-20; 4:1-3,6,11,13-16; 6:12,20; Eph. 5:11; 2 Tim. 1:13-15; 2:1-4,14-18; 3:1-9,13,16-17; 4:1-5). Other things are not to be neglected as the church is alert to and pursuing the exposure of and action against false teachers. Christ commended Ephesus for these works (Rev. 2:2-3,6) but condemned leaving their "first love" (2:4).

10. *We must continually point men to God's Word as our guide on earth for reaching heaven* (Acts 20:32). As the apostles were inspired to speak or write, when men heard or read, they could know the mind of God and His will for us (Eph. 3:1-7; cf. 1 Cor. 2:9-13). We must emphasize

the completeness of that revealed Word (Eph. 3:5; 2 Tim. 3:16-17). There is no substitute. Never apologize for pointing men to God's Word for "doctrine, reproof, correction, or instruction in righteousness." Read it, know it, for your soul and the souls of others depend on knowing, believing and obeying its contents.

11. *We must continue to emphasize Christ's church, exclusive of any other religion.* Paul shows in Ephesians 4:4-6 that there are distinctive elements about Christ's church which cannot be enlarged, reduced, or modified. Where God's Word says there is "**one** body, spirit, hope, Lord, faith, baptism and God and Father," there can be no more nor any less than "one" of any of these items. Where there is only one, we have no choice but to accept God's way as revealed in Scripture. We have no authority to try to blend in elements from denominational or idolatrous religions.

12. *We must also teach and live out in our lives the fact that individual Christianity involves the death of the "old man" of sin and the coming to life of the "new man" created by God in righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:17-24).* This calls for a new lifestyle. The way we talk, think, and act are all to be brought into harmony with God's will (4:25-5:21). Christianity is to be seen in all our relationships in the home, at work, in our community, and in the church (5:22-6:9).

13. *We must equip ourselves for victory over the schemes of Satan by putting on "the whole armor of God"* (Eph. 6:10-20). Satan cannot touch nor harm saints so dressed. We must be ever alert that the war continues and that we fight the good fight, both defending the faith and going on the offensive to capture men's souls for God with the sword of the Spirit, God's Word (Eph. 6:17; 2 Cor. 10:3-5; Rev. 2:1-7).

14. *We must be aware that, however great Ephesus was as an influence for God's Way, it no longer functions as a church for which the Lord died.* They had the proper instruction in the faith; they were encouraged to continue in the faith and teach it to others who would carry on the work, but, at some time, those responsible failed to do their part, and the Lord's church there ceased to exist (cf. Rev. 2:5). Should we blame the elders for failing to feed and protect, the preachers for refusing to preach the whole counsel of God, or the members for accepting less from the elders and preachers than what God demands? All who are responsible will answer to God on the Judgment Day (Rom. 14:12; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 20:11-15).

If you are an elder, preacher, or member of the Lord's body who thinks these fourteen points are not part of your responsibility, you may be judged just as harshly as those who failed to measure up to what God taught the church at Ephesus. These things of the "past" are as important to the "present" church as they must be to the church of the "future."

The great thing about God's Word is its characteristic as a seed (cf. Matt. 13:3-9,18-23; Mark 4:14; Luke 8:11). Wherever the pure seed is sown, dedicated Christians will establish a church of the Lord which is like the church at Ephesus in all its good points, and it will grow and prosper as long as the pure seed continues to be sown, unmixed with the seed of weeds (cf. Matt. 13:36-43). There may never be another faithful church in Ephesus as there once was, but there will be faithful churches like Ephesus, when she was faithful, wherever God's Word is taught with the zeal and consistency which once characterized the church in that great city.

Endnotes

- 1 F. F. Bruce, **New Testament History** (New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 326.
- 2 Richard E. Oster, Jr., "Ephesus," IN: **The Anchor Bible Dictionary**, David Noel Freedman, ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), Vol. 2., p. 542.
- 3 Chester G. Starr, **A History of the Ancient World** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 279.
- 4 Oster, "Ephesus," Vol. 2., p. 545.
- 5 "Ephesus," **Oxford Encyclopedia of World History**, ed. Fran Alexander (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 219.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Everett Ferguson, **Backgrounds of Early Christianity** (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), pp. 39-40.
- 8 F. F. Bruce, "Commentary on the Book of Acts," IN: **The New International Commentary of the New Testament**, F. F. Bruce, ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980 reprint), pp. 400-401.
- 9 Oster, "Ephesus," p. 546.
- 10 Gareth L. Reese, **New Testament History: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Acts** (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1976), p. 687.
- 11 Clinton E. Arnold, **Powers of Darkness: Principalities and Powers in Paul's Letters** (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), p. 51.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Oster, "Ephesus," p. 548.
- 14 Ferguson, **Backgrounds of Early Christianity**, p. 559.
- 15 Reese, **Acts**, p. 696.
- 16 Ferguson, **Backgrounds of Early Christianity**, p. 65.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid., pp. 68-69.
- 21 Ibid., p. 90.
- 22 Ibid., p. 94. Ouch! This sounds remarkably like present day NASCAR events.

23 Bruce, **Acts**, p. 378.

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CHAPTER 18

Lessons From The Church At Philippi

Robert R. Taylor, Jr.

Introduction

GENUINE GRATITUDE IS EXPRESSED to B. J. Clarke, the Gelders, and the entire congregation here at Southaven for the gracious invitation to appear on this premiere lectureship, as I have done on each of the preceding ones. This lectureship is always on the cutting edge of truth and may that ever be its courageous stance.

The book of Philippians was addressed to the church that Paul planted in Philippi, a city of Macedonia, and located upon European soil. It was the first European congregation planted by the peerless Paul. This marvelous missive, or lovely letter, is a precious product, written by a precious man, addressed to a precious people, and with a precious person at its literary center—Jesus Christ, the Lord of Glory. It is not as profound as is Romans. It is not filled with problem solving counsel as are 1 and 2 Corinthians. It does not breathe the fiery apostolic defense as exhibited in Galatians. It is not a definitive document on the church as is eloquent and elegant Ephesians—Paul's marvelous masterpiece on the church. It is not written to a people he knew only indirectly as was Colossians. It is not written with the second advent primarily in mind as were 1 and 2 Thessalonians. It is not a literary discourse on Gospel preachers and their work of proclamation as

are the evangelistic epistles of 1, 2 Timothy and Titus. It is not an apostolic product penned to soften the heart of a wronged master relative to a runaway slave who is returning as is Philemon. It is not a treatise of truth written to arrest a plunge into apostasy as is Hebrews.

The precious Philippians received a letter that enjoys a literary distinction and uniqueness all its own. It has its own precious category to fill in the Sacred Canon and a void would have been left if it had not seen the light of printed day. The Philippians were not fickle as were the Galatians. They were not deniers of the Pauline apostleship as were the Galatians and the Corinthians. They were not on the very brink of apostasy as were the wavering Hebrews. They were not inundated with preacher worship, carnality, divisions, partyism, immorality, etc., as were the Corinthians.

They were living well the Christian life, were united, were filled with a spirit of love and of good will, were soul-conscious, and were deeply mindful of Paul. Imposed absence on his part from them had not dampened their love for him or dimmed their ascending appreciation for their precious apostolic benefactor who had brought first to them the light and life found in Christ and His glorious Gospel. If anything, their admiration, appreciation and affection had deepened. It had been right at ten years or more between the time Paul first came to them and the time of penning this epistle from distant Rome where he was a prisoner of the Roman Empire.

Learning of his imprisonment hundreds of miles to their west, they did far more than discuss him or lift an occasional prayer in his behalf. They collected a beautiful and bountiful contribution and sent it across land and water by the sacrificial and saintly hands of Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25-30; 4:14ff). Paul was so moved by this beautiful bounty and generous gift that he penned them this

marvelous and meaningful missive. Into the fabric of this excellent, eloquent, and elegant epistle he embroiders, or weaves, a message of love, appreciation and esteem unequalled in any of his other products. It is an epistle of deep joy, abounding love, and increasing cheer. It must have been the most satisfying epistle he ever penned. It has been a favorite reading, reflecting, preaching, writing, and practicing epistle of mine all my preaching life, which will soon reach fifty years—the fall of 1999.

The Establishment Of The Philippian Church

Certain New Testament congregations were established in circumstances unknown to us. Luke, penman of Acts, and the writers of the epistles have not recorded the details of congregational origins of such which would be of intense interest to all of us. Examples of such would be Rome, Colossae, and six of the seven churches portrayed in Revelation 2-3. Ephesus is the lone exception among these seven. We are not left in the dark relative to the establishment of the Philippian congregation. Luke saw to that as most of Acts 16 is devoted to Paul's coming to Philippi with his three co-laborers and the successful evangelism of this famed Macedonian metropolis.

In the latter part of Acts 15, Paul and Barnabas parted company relative to the feasibility of taking John Mark on the proposed second missionary trip. Barnabas was adamant that he go; Paul was equally adamant that he not go. Barnabas and Mark went one way; Paul chose Silas and they went another way. Leaving Antioch of Syria they traveled and preached through much of Asia Minor (modern Turkey). At Derbe and Lystra they were joined by Timothy. They continued across Asia Minor, being forbidden to preach in Asia and Bithynia. Finally, they come to Troas, where Luke joins them, making the number into a quartet. At Troas, Paul had the Macedonian vision

of the man requesting help. Crossing the beautiful blue Aegean Sea (one of the most beautiful bodies of water I have ever seen), they came to Neapolis and on to Philippi, a dozen miles inland.

Information relative to the city itself is of interest. Philippi was the chief city of that part of Macedonia. It had been founded some four centuries earlier by Philip of Macedonia, illustrious father of Alexander the Great. The city was named in honor of Philip, its talented Macedonian builder. Being a colony, it was almost a "Little Rome" and a place that served a triple purpose for Rome itself. (1) A Roman colony served as a military safeguard in the outer regions of the far-flung empire. (2) A Roman colony served to keep in line any governmental agents who might think in terms of rebellion against Rome. (3) A Roman colony served as a place of reward to give those who had served the empire with distinction in times of crises, such as wars, and also as desirable living quarters for Italian citizens who needed to be moved to a more remote part of the far-flung empire. Citizens of a Roman colony copied Rome on the Tiber to an amazing degree. They prided Roman citizenship, the display of the Roman insignia throughout the city, the speaking of Rome's official language—Latin, and in adhering closely toward Roman law. Colonies enjoyed Roman privileges not vouchsafed to lesser blessed cities and towns.

Philippi enjoyed unusual historic importance. In first century B.C., a very decisive battle was fought between Brutus (murderer of Julius Caesar) and Cassius on the one hand and Octavianus (later called Augustus) and Mark Antony (B.C. 42). The latter two defeated the former two, and this shaped greatly the future of the Roman Empire. Augustus, when Emperor, never forgot the Macedonian city that gave him a victory propelling him to the Emperor's throne. He raised the city to colony status. When

Paul and his traveling colleagues arrived in Philippi, they were in a thoroughly Roman city. Philippi was built on the banks of the Gangites River. This, doubtlessly, was the river upon whose banks Lydia and her household of women assembled for worship under Judaism. This is seen in that their worship day was Saturday or the Jewish sabbath.

Apparently, there was little or no permanent Jewish population in Philippi. There was no Jewish synagogue to serve as a Pauline base, as had been true in other cities he had evangelized. Having spotted a place of worship on the river banks, they surmised that worship occurred there. They met with Lydia and certain women on the sabbath. This was not the Lord's Day under Christianity but the seventh day of worship under Judaism. Quite likely, these women did not know of its cessation at Calvary as per Colossians 2:14-17. Paul preached. Lydia and the women listened intently. The women with her were likely her aides in her purple-selling business. Luke presents Lydia prior to conversion, in conversion and subsequent to conversion. Prior to conversion, she was an earnest, loyal worshiper of God under Judaism. Though far from her home in Thyatira on Asiatic soil, she, now on European soul, was diligent in her duty to Deity. Her purple-selling business is shut down for the day and she, with her aides, are sabbath keepers. They were not idolaters as were many of their Philippian peers.

There is Lydia in conversion. She heard Paul. The Lord opened her heart. This was not done miraculously but by the Gospel Paul proclaimed. This is the way He still opens human hearts. She attended to what Paul taught. This meant Gospel obedience. She heard, believed, repented, confessed Christ, and was immersed. So were the women of her household. Sufficiency of water was available in the river before them for immersions to have occurred.

Devotees of infant baptism claim sanction for their practice here. Assumption is the daring game they play. They assume Lydia was married; there is no mention of a husband. They assume she had children; no children are mentioned. They assume that, among her children, there were infants; no infants are mentioned. They assume that these infants were baptized upon Lydia's faith and choice; no infant baptisms are mentioned. Practices of truth do not rest on assumptions but upon facts, provable facts. Later, Paul and his group were reluctant to stay with Lydia and her household, which would not have been the case at all had there been a husband and children present.

Later, in Acts 16, there is the expulsion of the demon from the Philippian girl. She brought in much money to her manipulative masters. Upon being deprived of her Satanic services, they brought serious accusations against Paul and Silas. We are not told why Luke and Timothy escaped this serious situation. Paul and Silas are whipped publicly and imprisoned for the night. The earthquake paved the way for Paul's preaching to the jailor and his household. He had just been ready to take his own life for fear the prisoners had escaped, and he would be held liable the following morning. Paul saved his life physically. Snatched from the very shadows of a death by suicide, he inquired of Paul and Silas what he must do to be saved (Acts 16:30). Paul and Silas answered his question in 16:31 and the subsequent verses. Subsequent to the sermon, he was a different man than the one who had placed them into stocks the evening before. He took Paul and Silas to a place where there was water and bathed their bruises. Then he and his family were baptized sometime after midnight. On the next day Paul and Silas were fully vindicated. They visited briefly with the brethren before leaving for the next needed field of evangelism. Such is the beautiful beginning of the Philippian congregation—

one that would endear itself to Paul for many years in his future. That congregation is dear to each of us because of its goodness and greatness in the cause of truth.

A Full Decade Later

It is generally believed Paul established the Philippian congregation about A.D. 50-51. This was during his second missionary journey. From there he went to Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth before returning to Antioch of Syria. Luke records all these visits in Acts 17-18. At Corinth he stayed eighteen months. Then we have all the third missionary journey, which included another visit to Philippi (20:3-6). During that journey he stayed at Ephesus for three years, as we learn in 20:31. He returned to Jerusalem where he was arrested, spent two years at Caesarea as a prisoner, and then went to Rome for another two years of imprisonment (28:30-31). The Roman imprisonment would have been about A.D. 61-63. Sometime during these two years he penned Philippians, a love letter of precious proportions. In that same imprisonment, he penned Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon. So, it had been a full decade or more between the time he first visited Philippi and when he penned this magnificent missive to them.

A Going, Growing, And Glowing Congregation

They were going with the Gospel in full harmony with Matthew 28:19 and Mark 16:15. They were growing in the Christian graces or the fruit of the Spirit. They were glowing as shining lights in the pagan society where they lived (Phil. 1:5-11; 2:14-16). Apostolic commendations abound in this eloquent epistle relative to this good, great and grand congregation. Paul addressed them as saints in Christ Jesus (1:1). This meant they had been sanctified

(set apart) by the Word of God (John 17:17). Like the Ephesians to their southeast, they had been cleansed and sanctified by “the washing of water by the word” (Eph. 5:26). They had entered Christ by walking the royal route of hearing, faith, repentance, confession and immersion (Rom. 10:17; Acts 16:31; 17:30; Rom. 10:9-10; 6:3-4; Gal. 3:27). They had been added to the church of the Lord by Deity, as were their Jewish counterparts in Jerusalem (Acts 2:47).

They were scripturally organized. They had bishops to oversee and deacons to serve (Phil. 1:1). They were the gracious recipients of grace and peace as dispensed to them by Deity (1:2).

They provided a wonderful memory bank for Paul. Therein they had deposited spiritual currency from which Paul could draw out memories both pleasant and precious. “I thank my God upon every remembrance of you” was his apostolic assessment of them early in the epistle (1:3). It was a congregation for which Paul prayed joyfully, fervently, and frequently (1:4). Like those in Acts 2:42, they had continued faithfully or stedfastly (Phil. 1:5). They were not an “on and off” people but had furthered faithfully the Gospel within their fervent framework of fellowship from conversion to the time Paul wrote them. Paul was optimistic about their future with Jehovah God as Holy Helper (1:6). They had joined permanent hands of help with Paul (1:7). Like Aaron and Hur with Moses in Exodus 17:8-12, they had held high Pauline hands in Gospel proclamation.

Thoughts of them in Paul’s heart were both tender and merciful (Phil. 1:8). Prayerfully, he prayed for their richer and fuller development as soldiers of the Saviour (1:9-11). Christianity is never static but demands a continuation of dynamic development.

True friends are those before whom one may think aloud whether orally or by the pen. This Paul does with the pen in verses 1:12-18 as he recounts his experiences in Rome as a prisoner. Everything was working out for the furtherance of the gospel that both he and they loved with such loyalty. This was paramount to Paul and also to the precious people at Philippi. Paul was set for the defense of the Gospel (1:17). So were his readers at Philippi. Paul knew Philippian petitions were being lifted for him in their prayers (1:19). Never at anytime did he want to be ashamed. At all times he wanted to be a bold presenter of the Truth (1:20). Paul was in a strait (narrow place) desirous of going on to be with the Lord and yet selflessly desirous of remaining in this life longer to help the Philippians and others in their running of the Christian race (1:21-26).

He counseled them to walk worthy of the Gospel, to stand fast and be a united people for the sake of the faith of the Gospel (1:27). They were not to be terrified by their enemies but to be bold believers ready to suffer for the Saviour even as they had seen Paul do and now heard he was doing in distant Rome (1:29-30).

In 2:1-4 he counseled them relative to both positive and negative essentials. This quartet of verses presented a courageous challenge to them in daily Christian living.

In 2:5-11 he encouraged them to have in them the mind of Christ—selflessness, humility and obedience. The rewards to Christ came subsequently and the same would be true of the Philippians when they imitated their adorable Advocate on heavenly high.

Their brand of beautiful obedience was noble and noteworthy (2:12). They had always obeyed and Paul urged a continuation of the same for their future. They were to work out their “own salvation with fear and trembling” (2:12). Why? (1) It was a command of God. (2) No other

human could do it for them. Salvation is not a matter of proxy. (3) Deity would not do for them that which was incumbent on them personally. (4) Heaven or hell rested on whether they adhered to this or rejected it with rebellion.

Paul was not of the Shelly-Harris view that we do not contribute a single whit to our salvation.¹ He was not of the Glenn Owen fallacy that we are “saved by grace plus nothing.” Owen has been a longtime elder at Highland in Abilene, Texas. I remember visiting Highland in Abilene nearly forty years ago when it was a sound and solid congregation. E. R. Harper once preached there as local evangelist. His kind of preaching would not be welcomed there at the end of this century for as much as one sermon! Such folly as the foregoing is **nothing** but fallacy and falsehood of the deepest dye; it is devilish and damnable doctrine. God helps but does not do it all (2:13-16). Paul was both negative in 2:14 and positive in 2:15-16. Negatively, they were not to be murmurers or disputers. Positively, they were to be blameless and harmless as sons of God living in a crooked and perverse society. They were to “shine as lights in the world” (2:15). This is richly reminiscent of Matthew 5:14-16. They were to hold “forth the word of life,” permitting Paul to know that his work among them was not futile (Phil. 2:16).

Paul spoke of the mutual joy they both experienced in Christ (2:17-18). A beautiful and well-deserved tribute of Timothy is next depicted by Paul (2:19-24). Soon, he expected to send Timothy to them. Timothy would be a spiritual shot in the arm for them.

In 2:25-30 Paul paints a masterpiece of one of the Philippian members—Epaphroditus. It is an intense insight of how Epaphroditus felt toward Paul and his own brethren back home in Philippi when they heard of his serious sickness in distant Rome. Reflected beautifully also

is Pauline affection and appreciation for this courageous Philippian messenger who had risked limb and life to bring Philippian aid to him while in prison. There is also the great sensitivity Paul felt upon learning how concerned Philippi was about their very ill member in Rome. It is a powerful picture of Christian love and caring. We would do well to emulate more of this in congregational situations today. We would have much less in the way of congregational friction.

In 3:1 Paul supplied the realm in which their joy was to be manifested—in the Lord. He will do more of the same in 4:4. Repetition was not irksome to Paul, and, for his readers, it was eminently safe (3:1). Weighty warnings are then extended (3:2-3). It surely is not the unloving thing to do such warning today. Brethren need to be warned of such falsehood today and those who cruelly, coldly, and callously propagate such, all the liberals among us to the contrary notwithstanding!

In 3:4-6 Paul gives us his past in Judaism from honorable birth, through many noteworthy accomplishments and to the time of his conversion to Christ. In between his two births, physical into Judaism and spiritual into Christianity, he had persecuted the church of the Lord. In 3:7-11 he recounts the willing loss of all things in which he once gloried for the glorious gains he now preciousy possesses in Christ—his spiritual home and haven since Ananias immersed him in Acts 22:16 and 9:18. The Philippians had suffered the loss of some things also but had gained blessings incomparable in Christ.

Resoluteness permeated every sacred syllable of 3:12-15. His life was goal-oriented—heaven at last. He wanted the Philippians to be of like precious mind (3:15-17).

With sadness of spirit and hurt of heart, Paul spoke of enemies of Calvary (3:18-19). This he had done often. He wept each time he had to give this weighty warning.

Paul was not tolerant toward egregious errorists, as the “sweet-spirited” liberals and Change Agents are in our day of alarming apostasy. About the only ones the Change Agents are intolerant toward today are those of us who still stand where some of them once stood and where all of them still need to be standing. John had such people in mind when he wrote 1 John 2:18. Their tragic destiny is set forth clearly and concisely in Philippians 3:19.

In 3:20-21 Paul surveyed his and their heavenly future. Were Paul still here today, surely he would love to sing, “Heaven Will Surely Be Worth It All.”

Affectionately, Paul delineates how dear and precious the Philippians were to him (4:1). He encouraged their standing stedfastly in the Lord. Verse 2 will be noted in the next segment of developing thought.

Dedicated women are mentioned in 4:3 along with Clement. Be it recalled that the initial members of the Philippian congregation were women (Acts 16:13-15). These commended women meant much to Paul and to the cause of Christ at Philippi. Their names had been inscribed in the book of life (4:3; cf. Dan. 12:1; Luke 10:20; Rev. 3:5; 20:12).

Again, Paul enjoined that they rejoice in the Lord (Phil. 4:4). Paul and the Philippians knew there was joy in Jesus. Sought in any other realm, it always eludes the searcher.

Moderation is enjoined on them in 4:5. Moderation here is forbearance, gentleness, a readiness to yield to the rights of others and consideration for the feelings of others. Tolle and Macknight delineate it as “sweet reasonableness ...meekness under provocation.” “The Lord is at hand” should not be construed as teaching He was about ready to come in A.D. 61-63. We live more than nineteen centuries later and He has not yet come. He was near to inspect, observe, and bless. On Mars Hill Paul affirmed to pagan

philosophers that Jehovah God is not “far from every one of us” (Acts 17:27). Prayer and peace form the keynotes in verses 6-7 of the epistle’s fourth chapter. Mental health is discussed in detail in 4:8.

Expressions of apostolic appreciation emerge in 4:10-18. There had been a time when they had no opportunity to help him. This was due, likely, to their not knowing his whereabouts (4:10). But now their care had flourished again. Even when he had little, there was no murmuring or complaining. He had learned both how to be abased and how to abound. He coped courageously with either circumstance in his life (4:12). He found total sufficiency in his Saviour who strengthened him (4:13).

He commended the revival of their communication or fellowship with him (4:14). Philippian generosity had been constant. Upon leaving Macedonia, home of Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea, no other church communicated with him concerning giving and receiving “but ye only” (4:15). Yet in 2 Corinthians 11:8 he stated that he robbed (took wages) of other churches while providing Corinth a signal spiritual service. Evidently, the Philippians received Pauline help from other churches, added their own contribution, and sent it all to Paul at Corinth. If correct in this, then the anti position that each church has to send directly to the missionary, and never through a sponsoring church, is refuted coming and going. Our long established practice along this line is scripturally authorized. We do this at Ripley, being the sponsoring congregation for Joe Ruiz in Taiwan, and you do it here at Southaven, as sponsoring congregation for Cliff Lyons. We are on scriptural ground in said practices.

Paul rose above selfishness in this gift reception and desired fruit that would accrue to Philippian accounts (4:17). Gratitude again abounds in 4:18. The ever-giving God would reward them richly (4:19). A doxology is given

the Father in verse 20. Salutations and greetings grace the remarks in verses 21-22. The Gospel had made it even into Caesar's household (4:22). The drawing power of the cross is amply evident here (cf. John 12:32).

The final verse reads, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen" (4:23). How typical is this apostolic conclusion in the Pauline writings.

Words Of Censure

Philippians 4:2 reads, "I beseech Euodias, and beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord." In the English text, subject (I) and verb (beseech) precede the names of the two women who are admonished by Paul. However, in the Greek text, the names of the women appear first, i.e., "Euodia I exhort, and Syntyche I exhort." This made it very emphatic when read before the Philippian assembly, which was the common practice in that day (cf. Col. 4:16; Rev.1:3). No other information about these women appears in any other verse. They were Philippian members and were out of spiritual harmony with each other. No specifics are given. Apparently, both were guilty as Paul equally charges both to straighten out the matter and do it promptly. They constituted a disruptive element; they were the two flies in the ointment of an unusually united congregation. Philippians 1:27 and 2:2, when read earlier, should have hit home with these feuding women. This is the only rebuke in four chapters and 104 verses. This is utterly amazing in view of the many rebukes found in other of the Pauline productions of Sacred Scripture.

Twelve Lessons Learned From Philippians

1. Faithful preachers can and should have pleasant memories of congregations for which they have formerly preached (cf. 1:3).

2. Every Gospel preacher should be set for the defense of the Gospel, as was Paul in 1:17.
3. Death is a gain only to those safe and secure in Christ, inclusive of babies and little children as well as the saved among the accountable.
4. A congregation can be holy, harmonious, peace-loving, and keepers of unity even as Philippi was.
5. Jesus Christ must be the very center of our attitudes, conversations, and deeds.
6. There is marvelous power in examples such as Paul, Timothy, Epaphroditus, and the women who had helped Paul at Philippi.
7. Stedfastness in service and worship is a marvelous must.
8. Those worthy of commendation should be commended. Philippians is full of such.
9. Enemies of Calvary are on a speeding roller coaster whose destination is eternal hell.
10. Gratitude is one of the noblest virtues of the human soul. There is far too little of it in our ungrateful and greedy world.
11. We are not what we think we are; we are what we think.
12. The Prince Of Peace with His Gospel of peace can make congregations of peace and harmony

Conclusion

What a powerful, profitable, and precious book Philippians is to every lover of truth.

Endnote

1 Rubel Shelly & Randall J. Harris. **The Second Incarnation** (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing, 1992), p. 207.

CHAPTER 19

**Pictures Of The Church:
Body Of Christ,
Household Of God**

Jerry Martin

Introduction

FOR SEVEN YEARS NOW, this faithful congregation has hosted the **POWER** Lectureship. Having lived in the state of Colorado during the first six years, I had to rely on the lecture books and tapes from which to glean insightful truths. It is truly a delight this year to be here in person not only to gain insight from the uplifting lessons but also to be edified by the sweet fellowship of faithful brothers and sisters in Christ. I want to personally thank the elders of the Southaven congregation and brother B. J. Clarke for inviting me to speak on the lectureship this year. I am grateful for each and every member of the Lord's body that meets here and for the many good things you do to build up the household of God.

In keeping with this year's theme, **The Lord's Church: Past, Present, Future**, I have been given the assignment to discuss the church from two intriguing vantage points: pictured as the **body of Christ** and as the **household of God**. To see these two analogies of the church clearly, we must allow the inspired Scriptures to fit us with first century glasses. The present religious world

is so crowded with counterfeit and perverted definitions of the church our eyes can easily become so covered with cataracts we will be unable to clearly see the beauty of its relationship to Christ. Without our first century glasses we might view the church as no more than a confused, divided, dysfunctional denominational family where neither roles nor functions can be clearly identified.

The Church Pictured As The Body Of Christ

Few analogies manifest the closeness the church sustains to Christ like this one: “the body of Christ.” There are some intrinsic features that are naturally built into this analogy. This may be why Paul seemed to favor this description of the church.¹

The most obvious feature of this Divinely designed relationship is that Christ is the head: “And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence” (Col. 1:18). As the head of the physical body is the supreme source of guidance, so Christ occupies that position over the spiritual body, the church. He was given this position by God the Father: “And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all” (Eph. 1:22-23).

Christ’s headship over the church ensures and determines salvation for this body: “For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body” (Eph. 5:23). The authority to command resides in the head: “And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth” (Matt. 28:18). The body, or church, then is subject to the head, Christ, and is readily responsive to His directions and dictates: “Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own

husbands in every thing” (Eph. 5:24). We will not be added to the church, or body, where salvation resides without first following the instructions that come from Christ as the head of the church. Christ authoritatively instructed His apostles what to preach, and they proclaimed:

Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ. Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do? Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call. And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation. Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls...Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved (Acts 2:36-41,47).

Note that they all did the same thing and therefore were added to the same church, the body. What a freakish distortion it is to say there could be more than one head or that there can be many bodies overseen by one head! Yet the denominational world would paint for us such a monstrous picture.

When we picture the church as the body of Christ, we are able to see the intended functions dictated by such an analogy. When Paul writes to the church at Corinth

and informs them of the use (or misuse) of their spiritual gifts, he illustrates the function of the physical body and makes application to the function of the spiritual body:

For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him. And if they were all one member, where were the body? But now are they many members, yet but one body. And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary: And those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness. For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked: That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular (1 Cor. 12:12-27).

As we receive complete and clear directions from Christ, the head, each of us as individual members of His body must identify our function and exercise it in cooperation with the other members for the good of the whole body. Though we are many members we each have something we provide that contributes to the proper function of the body. There is no reason for any member to feel useless or worthless. We should all remember, "God hath tempered the body together" (12:24).² Each and every member works with and for each other.

When we truly see the distinct relationship Christ has with His church, when we finally see the features that are dictated by the one occupying the position of complete and supreme headship over the spiritual body, and when we consciously accept and diligently carry out our function in His body, then and only then will we understand and focus with the unity demanded and required of a spiritually healthy body. We must picture the church as the body before we can fully understand the oneness Jesus prayed for:

Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me (John 17:20-21).

The instructions from the head are intended to ensure that the body works in unison. If we allow the cancerous influences of the world to invade the body, they will block us from the clear signals from Christ. The body will then malfunction, attack itself, and eventually self-destruct. That is why Paul penned this warning:

Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you;

but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul? (1 Cor. 1:10-13).

The health of each individual part of the body is directly dependent upon there being no obstructions in the communication lines from the head to that body part. Since Christ is the head and has preeminence (Col. 1:18), He is the only one who has the authority to speak to us and dictate our function in the body (Heb. 1:2). We must allow nothing to break the lines of communication that directly link us to Christ. The Hebrews writer explains it in the following words:

Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip. For if the word spoken by angels was stedfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompence of reward; How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will? (2:1-4).

Just as the lines of communication must be maintained with Christ as the head of the body, so each of us as Christians must be inseparably linked to every other member of the body. Just as we have to work at keeping

the physical body healthy and in good working condition, we also have to put forth diligent effort to keep the spiritual body in the same healthy and active condition. Such health does not just happen—there are certain ingredients and exercises that are necessary to bring it about:

I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all (Eph. 4:1-6).

Christ, as the head, has provided us with all the proper instructions and ingredients to grow into a full-grown, spiritually active, and healthy body. Each of us, as members of the body, have to keep focused on the fact that we are part of the whole and that there is something we must supply if the body is to grow properly. Notice Paul's assurance of such as he exhorted the Ephesian Christians to use what they had been given for the building up of the body:

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about

with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love (4:11-16).

Paul insists that the body should not lose its focus but be of one mind, the mind of Christ:

If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus (Phil. 2:1-5).

The Church Pictured As The Household Of God

Paul's words to Timothy give an added perspective of the church and its relationship to Deity:

These things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly: But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim. 3:14-15).

W. E. Vine points out that “house” can denote a dwelling place or members of household or family.³ It is the latter analogy that is used in Paul’s words to Timothy. The church is obviously the family of God. We are determined to be children of God and therefore members of His family, or household, by the new birth. We enter the family the same way we enter the kingdom of God; we are born again and thereby delivered into the spiritual family:

Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God (John 3:3-5).

This spiritual birth that places us into the family is brought about by the Word of God: “Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever” (1 Pet. 1:23). Paul leaves no doubt as to how we all become children of God:

For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise (Gal. 3:26-29).

God has no children outside His family or household. There are only two choices of families here on this earth—

the family of God or the family of the devil (John 8:44-49; Matt. 6:24).⁴ If we choose, we can stop serving Satan and obey the instructions of our loving God and thereby enter His family and be transformed into His image (Col. 3:1-5).

After we are delivered into the family of God, we must recognize that now we dwell in His household. We have a spiritual family to dwell with while here on this earth, and we have family rules to follow. Since, through the new birth, we were delivered from the world, we can no longer live in the world. There is a proper behavior expected of God's family, the church. Since we all entered the family the same way we are all expected to behave in the same way:

Now I say, That the heir, as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all; But is under tutors and governors until the time appointed of the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world: But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father. Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ. Howbeit then, when ye knew not God, ye did service unto them which by nature are no gods. But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage? (Gal. 4:1-9).

To dwell in God's family and be called His children demands that we live by the high standard set by our Father.

As sons and daughters of God, we cannot live by the rules of the world:

Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty. Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God (2 Cor. 6:14-7:1).

The fact that we have a high priest over the household of God should cause us to be confident in our relationship with God. We should also, as we consider our relationship with one another, be constant and faithful:

And having an high priest over the house of God; Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;) And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one

another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching. For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace? For we know him that hath said, Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord. And again, The Lord shall judge his people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. But call to remembrance the former days, in which, after ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions; Partly, whilst ye were made a gazingstock both by reproaches and afflictions; and partly, whilst ye became companions of them that were so used. For ye had compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance. Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompence of reward. For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise. For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him. But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul (Heb. 10:21-39).

As members of the household of God, the church, we receive and expect to receive discipline from our Father and our family. If there is no discipline then there is no love:

And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons. Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness. Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby (12:5-11).

If we are members of the same family and are disciplined by the same Father, then we should not be offended when we receive discipline from our brothers and sisters in Christ. We should expect a loving family to respond in our best interest:

Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted (Gal. 6:1).

Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins (Jas. 5:19-20).

The church as the household of God has a way it is to behave (1 Tim. 3:15). When we, as individual members of this spiritual household, receive properly the discipline from our Father and our family, we then can learn how to practice more effective self-discipline. Paul encouraged such:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God (Rom. 12:1-2).

Paul applied such discipline to his own life: “But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway” (1 Cor. 9:27).

The church as the household of God has an eternal inheritance determined for it:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last

time. Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ: Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory: Receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls (1 Pet. 1:3-9).

Jesus, our elder brother in the household of God, has gone to prepare us a permanent place to dwell in the Father's house. He will one day come again for us so we can live with Him eternally:

Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also (John 14:1-3).

Conclusion

In our brief study together, we hopefully have come to see more clearly the church as it is pictured as the body of Christ and the household of God. We ought to be grateful beyond words for the opportunity to gladly receive the incorruptible Word and be baptized into Christ, being assured then that He saves us and adds us to His church, the body. What a privilege it is to be a member of the family of God while here on this earth and to have the promise that relationship will continue throughout eternity! May

each of us determine never to allow anyone to remove us personally from such a privileged closeness with the Lord and each other. May we likewise determine never to allow anyone or anything to remove nor distort the beauty portrayed by the church being pictured as the body of Christ and the household of God.

Endnotes

1 Leon Barnes, **My Place in the Body** (North Little Rock), p. 2.

2 Bill Jackson, "The Church—the Body of Christ," **The Church—the Beautiful Bride of Christ**, eds. Garland Elkins & Thomas B. Warren (Jonesboro, AR: National Christian Press), p. 229.

3 W. E. Vine, **Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words**, (McLean, VA: Mac Donald Publishing), p. 576.

4 N. B. Hardeman, **Hardeman's Tabernacle Sermons**, Volume 4 (Gospel Advocate), p. 201.

CHAPTER 20

**Pictures of The Church:
The Army of God, The
Temple of God, The
Kingdom of God**

Don Walker

Appreciation

BEFORE WE BEGIN OUR study of this most wonderful topic, I would like to express my appreciation to this fine congregation, to her elders, deacons, preachers, and each of the saints for this great privilege of contributing to this written record of the 7th annual **POWER** Lectureship. I am confident this work will be of great value to the Lord's church both in the present and in the future. We do appreciate all the good work this congregation has done for the Lord's church. Your **POWER** publication, past lectureships, and past books have been of the highest quality, and we anticipate nothing less in this and in the future.

I would especially like to commend the editor of this book and the director of the lectureship, brother B. J. Clarke. I can honestly say that I have literally thrilled to every lesson I have had the privilege to hear him present. It is evident from his writing and preaching that he loves the Lord and has a deep, reverential respect for God's Word. I am happy to call him friend and look forward to, if not

directly, then at least indirectly laboring together with him in this great Kingdom of our God.

Introduction

On the coast of Caesarea Philippi over 1900 years ago, Jesus asked His disciples a question. In Matthew 16 we read this question, the disciples' answer, and the following comments of our Lord:

When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am? And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets. He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it (Matt. 16:13-18).

The Lord kept His promise to build His church, and we see that she is indeed a glorious body.

Much work and preparation by many went into the establishment of the Lord's church. Paul wrote:

And to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ: To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, According to the

eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ
Jesus our Lord (Eph. 3:9-11).

The Lord's church was hid in the mind of God from the beginning of the world. Her design, her nature, her purpose, and her work were all determined by God before He created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1). The type of individual who would enter the church and those that would not were determined by God before time began (cf. Luke 8:1-11). In summation, God would design the Lord's church.

Jesus Christ would build the church, and He would be offered on behalf of the church (Eph. 5:25). Jesus Christ purchased the church with His own blood (Acts 20:28). While on earth, Jesus was preparing men for the coming of the Kingdom. Matthew 4:23 reads, "And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the Kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people."

The Holy Spirit also had a role in the establishment of the church of Christ. He would usher the Kingdom in with power. Notice these four references which led up to the establishment of the Lord's church:

And he said unto them, Verily I say unto you,
That there be some of them that stand here, which
shall not taste of death, till they have seen the
Kingdom of God come with power (Mark 9:1).

And, behold, I send the promise of my Father upon
you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until
ye be endued with power from on high (Luke
24:49).

But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy
Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be

witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth (Acts 1:8).

And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance (2:4).

These passages teach that the Kingdom would come with power. The power that Christ was speaking of was the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles (1:8). All three persons of the Godhead certainly fulfilled various roles in the establishment of the church. So, when we study concerning this great theme, we must understand that Heaven is involved.

Men also had a part in the establishment of the glorious church of Christ. The prophets would prophesy concerning the church (Isa. 2; Dan. 2; Joel 2; Mic. 4). This they did, “not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things” (1 Pet. 1:12). John the Immerser would also fulfill an important role as far as preparing men for the church. So, too, the apostles would participate in the establishing of the Lord’s church. When we consider all that participated in the establishment of the Lord’s church, we know that we have not even scratched the surface here.

However, let us turn our attention to our specific topic as we notice different pictures of the New Testament church.

The Church Of Christ: The Army Of God

In the Book of Revelation, we read of conflict and battle between good and evil. From the very beginning of time, when the serpent opposed Eve with a lie, there has been a conflict between the forces of Satan and the troops of Jehovah. When we open our New Testaments then, it is no surprise that the Lord’s church is pictured as an army.

Paul wrote of the conflict and his approach to the battle when he addressed the Corinthian saints. Paul wrote:

Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway (1 Cor. 9:24-27).

As he neared the end of his dwelling in his earthly tabernacle, Paul would be able to write:

I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing (2 Tim. 4:7-8).

Both of these references remind us of the fact that there is a great conflict raging, and the Lord's church must face the battle as an army who will follow her Commander-in-Chief into war.

The old warrior Paul would encourage the young preacher Timothy to continue strong in this battle. Paul wrote:

For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind. Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of

our Lord, nor of me his prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel according to the power of God (1:7-8).

He later would encourage him to endure as a good soldier:

Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier (2:3-4).

Simply looking at these few references reminds us that we are in a battle. And the Lord's church needs to stand up and be heard for righteousness. The church is the "pillar and ground of truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). She has the responsibility to stand up for the Lord and His cause. If we do not, who will? The denominations will not do it, for they do not even know what truth is. The government will not do it. In fact, most of the time, especially in these times, it seems the government is on the wrong side of truth. If we do not do it, then it simply will not be done. It is time we arouse out of our sleep and get busy in the battle:

Wherefore he saith, Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light. See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil (Eph. 5:14-16).

Edmond Burke once said, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to sit idly by." Again, Emerson said, "Error encircles the earth while truth is putting on its boots." It is time that the church got busy as the army of the Lord. With Paul we encourage Christians to "Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life,

whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses” (1 Tim. 6:12).

While we picture the church as the Army of God, we will focus on these points. First, we will see who our leader is. Second, we will see who the enemy is and, third, we will see what weapon we have to fight this battle.

Our Captain

The Hebrews writer reflects on the marvelous sacrifice Christ has provided for mankind. In so doing he refers to Christ as “the captain of their salvation” (Heb. 2:10). In Matthew 4, Jesus battles the enemy face to face and shows us how to gain the victory. Our Saviour, Jesus Christ, waged a war against the enemy His entire life here on earth and bears the scars for it. Yet, He battled him perfectly and gained the victory. Jesus spoke of the victory while He was here on earth: “Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me” (John 12:31-32). Jesus spoke of the victory after He ascended to sit at the right hand of the throne of God: “I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death” (Rev. 1:18). Not only was Jesus the only one worthy to open the book and thus worthy of praise (5:5), He is the only one worthy to lead the troops into battle. We, His army, should “follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth” (14:4).

Our Enemy

In Luke 22:31, Jesus said, “And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat.” The great deceiver of the world (Rev. 12:9) is the enemy of our souls. Peter wrote:

Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world (1 Pet. 5:8-9).

This great adversary, who “beguiled Eve through his subtlety” (2 Cor. 11:3), “was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him” (John 8:44). The devil and his emissaries work under stealth. Jesus warned, “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves” (Matt. 7:15). Remember Paul’s warning to the elders of Ephesus in Acts 20:

For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them (vv. 29-30).

Paul also gave warning to the Corinthian brethren:

For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their works (2 Cor. 11:13-15).

Our adversary, the great enemy, is sly and we dare not be ignorant of his devices!

Our Weapon

The Captain of our salvation has not left us without power. He has equipped us completely for our battle:

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

In Romans 1:16 this God-inspired Scripture is mentioned as “the gospel, “which is the power of God unto salvation.”

As good soldiers of Christ, we must put on the whole armor of God. Paul details this armor in Ephesians 6:

Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Eph. 6:11-17).

In the above verses, Paul ends with “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” However, when we study each of the elements carefully, we see that each of these mentioned has some reference to the Word of God. It is a

powerful Word and will equip us to do God's will and fight the battles we must fight. The Hebrews writer will use the same imagery when he writes:

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart (4:12).

When we consider again Jesus and the record of His temptation in Matthew 4, we learn that Jesus Christ overcame Satan with "It is written...." The Psalmist reveals the same truth in principle that we see practically in the life of our Saviour:

Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way?
by taking heed thereto according to thy word.
With my whole heart have I sought thee: O let
me not wander from thy commandments. Thy
word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not
sin against thee (Psm. 119:9-11).

Oh, how the devil must tremble when we, the soldiers of the cross, properly wield the sword of the Spirit! In preparing for the battle, Paul said each one of us must "Give diligence to present thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, handling aright the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15, ASV). It is by reason of use of God's Word that we are going to be able to have our "senses exercised to discern both good and evil" (Heb. 5:14).

It is a powerful weapon our Lord has entrusted to us, and we dare not take for granted the marvelous privilege (1 Thess. 2:4). Paul addressed the power with which we have been equipped in 2 Corinthians 10:

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ; And having in a readiness to revenge all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled (vv. 3-6).

As the army of God, we must be ready for the battle. When our Captain leads, we must be following, recognizing the enemy and wielding the sword of the Spirit, the Word of God. Only then will we be able to please the One who has called us into battle.

The Church Of Christ: The Kingdom Of God

The four hundred years of silence between the testaments was broken by a clarion call for the people to repent, for John would proclaim “the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 3:2). John was the prophesied forerunner to Christ (Mal. 3:1; Isa. 40:3), who prepared the way of the Lord by preparing men for the coming kingdom. While Jesus was here on earth, He preached to prepare men for the coming kingdom. Mark wrote for us these powerful words:

Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel (Mark 1:14-15).

Truly, “Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and

healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people” (Matt. 4:23). This teaching took various forms while Christ was on earth. In the Sermon on the Mount, we find what many call the *Magna Carta* of kingdom living. In Matthew 13, we see a section of Scripture that is referred to as “Kingdom Parables.” In John and Jesus’ work concerning the kingdom, the point was that it was very near. It was so near, in fact, Jesus was able to say, “Verily I say unto you, That there be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power” (Mark 9:1; cf. Luke 9:27). So, with the kingdom’s impending arrival, Jesus would exhort, “But rather seek ye the kingdom of God; and all these things shall be added unto you. Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:31-32).

When we study carefully, we soon learn that the kingdom of which John and Jesus spoke was the Lord’s church. In fact, in Matthew 16:18-19, Jesus will use the two terms “kingdom” and “church” synonymously. It is in this context that we see the apostles given authority in the kingdom. The fact that the church is the kingdom is apparent when we learn that our coming unto the church means that we have received the kingdom (Heb. 12:22-28).

In Colossians 1:13, Paul wrote of Jehovah: “Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son.” Brethren in the first century had been translated into the kingdom when they had been converted and added to the church (Acts 2:47). Jesus told Nicodemus this conversion was a new birth which brought entrance into the kingdom (John 3).

Up until Acts 2, John and Jesus preached that the kingdom was at hand. However, after the day of Pentecost and the establishment of the church, the kingdom is spoken of as a reality and in existence. The church of Christ

is the kingdom of God! In the first century, we see the church partaking of the Lord's supper on the first day of the week. She continues this practice to this very day. Yet, Jesus placed the Lord's Supper in the kingdom. Notice these passages recorded by the pen of Luke:

For I say unto you, I will not any more eat thereof, until it be fulfilled in the kingdom of God. And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and said, Take this, and divide [it] among yourselves: For I say unto you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine, until the kingdom of God shall come (Luke 22:16-18).

And I appoint unto you a kingdom, as my Father hath appointed unto me; That ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (22:29-30).

When we consider the church as a kingdom, we speak not of an earthly kingdom. We speak, rather, of a spiritual kingdom (John 18:36; Rom. 14:17). And, where there is a kingdom, there must be a king! That King we know is the "Lord of lords and King of kings," Jesus Christ (Rev. 17:14). In His own teachings, He acknowledges the fact that He was the King (Luke 23:1-3). He is a victorious King who conquered to become King (Heb. 2:9; Rev. 1:18). Jehovah placed Christ in the position of King Himself (Eph. 1:18-23).

Yes, Christ is the King. We, as Christians, are citizens of His kingdom. We enter this kingdom by the new birth (John 3:1-7). After entering this kingdom we must continually offer up obedience to the Father (Matt. 7:21). True greatness in this kingdom comes not from pride or haughtiness, but rather from humble servitude (Matt. 20:20-28). Being a spiritual kingdom, we must center our

affections on heavenly things where our King resides (Col. 3:1-4). If we are in the church of Christ, then we are a kingdom of priests “unto God and His Father” (Rev. 1:6).

The Church Of Christ: The Temple Of God

In the Old Testament books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, we learn details concerning the building of and the events surrounding the tabernacle of God. It was to be a place where God would meet those who approached Him for praise and worship. When we close the book of Exodus, we see the people are no longer captives of Egypt. Rather, they have been freed by their mighty God. However, we must ask the question, “What value would there be in freeing these people if they were far removed from Jehovah?” So we see a place of worship, the tabernacle, being built. As we enter a study of Leviticus, we see details concerning worship. At this point the place of worship would be the tabernacle. In 2 Chronicles 7 we read of Solomon’s building the Temple. Again, this would indicate the presence of Jehovah, where the people could meet Him to worship Him. It is herein that God’s name would be recorded (Exod. 20:24).

In the New Testament, the church is a spiritual building in which the Spirit of God dwells. Paul wrote to the Corinthian brethren these powerful words: “For we are labourers together with God: ye are God’s husbandry, ye are God’s building” (1 Cor. 3:9). He would continue later in the chapter with the same thought: “Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and [that] the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are” (3:16-17).

One of the greatest chapters in the Bible is Ephesians 2. It begins with men who were dead in their trespasses and sins. It was a pitiful condition in which they once stood.

Paul describes it this way:

Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others...Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world (Eph. 2:2-3,11-12).

However,

God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus (2:4-6).

The chapter ends with those who once were useless, now cleansed by the blood of Christ (2:13), being built upon the foundation of Christ. Notice these thrilling words of Paul:

Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus

Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit (2:19-22).

Each Christian is a lively stone that is built into the temple that God recognizes as the church. Peter wrote:

Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture, Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner stone, elect, precious: and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded...ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light: Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy (1 Pet. 2:5-6,9-10).

Hence, we see that the church is the temple of God.

In the Old Testament, great care was to be taken in the building of the tabernacle and of the temple (Exod. 25:40; Heb. 8:1-5). With the Hebrews writer we ask, how much more care should be taken concerning the spiritual temple, the church? We find the dictates for the church in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, men would approach unto God to worship Him by entering the tabernacle or temple. In the New Testament, we approach unto God to glorify Him in the church. Paul wrote: "Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen" (Eph. 3:21). We say as

kindly as we can, yet without apology, “Every accountable human being must be a member of the church of Christ, which is the temple of God, or they will be eternally lost!” Men who are outside of the Lord’s church are not in a position to praise Him, nor are they in position to glorify their God. When we see the church as the temple of God we see great value and import placed upon her.

Conclusion

The church of Christ is a glorious church. She receives that glory from her Head, Jesus Christ. It is in this church that we glorify our Lord. Outside of her, we are “without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). In her, we are the Lord’s Church, His Army, His Kingdom, and His Temple. It is our prayer that this study will be of value to the reader and our exhortation is for each one of us to study our Bibles more and more.

CHAPTER 21

**Pictures Of The Church:
The Vineyard Of
The Lord**

Curtis Cates

Appreciation

SINCERE APPRECIATION IS EXPRESSED to the great Southaven congregation and her elders, who are unswervingly loyal to the Truth, for making the annual **POWER** Lectureship possible. And congratulations to brother B. J. Clarke for his excellent work in directing the lectureship. In light of the tremendous misunderstanding of the church of Christ in this present world, this year's theme, **The Lord's Church: Past, Present, Future**, is especially appropriate. And, how appropriate is the emphasis upon the **Lord's** church!

Introduction¹

One of the meaningful descriptions used in Holy Writ, including by our Lord, to picture in man's mind the nature and work of His church, is that of a vineyard. Note the following references:

For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that was a householder, who went out early in the morning to hire laborers into his vineyard...and to them he said, Go ye also into

the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you. ...He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard. And when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto the steward, call the laborers, and pay them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first (Matt. 20:1,4,7-8).

A man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work today in my vineyard (21:28).

See also references to the Lord's vineyard in Matthew 21:33-41, Mark 12:1-9, and Luke 20:9-18. Very powerful and timely lessons are to be gained from a study of the Lord's description of His vineyard.

Another one of the very beautiful descriptions utilized by the inspired writers to describe the church, the lovely bride of Christ (and directly connected to the Lord's use of the term "vineyard"), is "God's husbandry." The apostle Paul wrote, "For we are God's fellow-workers: ye are God's husbandry, God's building" (1 Cor. 3:9).

Though the only New Testament use of the word *georgion* (husbandry) is found in 1 Corinthians 3:9, the Scriptures are studded with references to husbandry and to viticulture. The Hebrew word for husbandry is *Adamah*, from the original husbandman Adam, meaning "of the ground."

God has been a husbandman, a *georgos*, from the creation of Adam and Eve. He has had three vineyards. The first group of choice vines which He planted was in the Garden of Eden, a lovely place which should have enabled man to bring forth plenteous fruit. However, not only did Adam and Eve betray His constant and tender care, but eventually God had virtually to destroy the vineyard with the universal flood. The second group of choice vines which He planted was Israel. He took them

as a vine out of Egypt, drove the Canaanites out of the Promised Land (Psm. 80:8-9), and planted His people in “a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards, of olive-trees and of honey” (2 Kings 18:32), “a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in valleys and hills,” and a land where they “shall not lack anything” (Deut. 8:7-9). He fenced her round with the Law of Moses. Yet, Israel was “ruined” (Isa. 3:8) for she “brought forth wild grapes” (5:2). The third group of choice vines which the Lord planted is His church (Matt. 16:18), the assembly of called out ones. Though He gives her His constant, tender care, will He search in vain to find grapes, finding only wild grapes?

The burden of this study will be to define “husbandry,” as it is particularly related to the vineyard; to investigate the church as God’s vineyard; to observe the problems of the vineyard in Corinth; to delineate the nature of work to be done in the vineyard; to envision the rewards for service; and to derive some practical lessons therefrom.

Vineyard And Husbandry Defined

The Words Themselves

The classical meaning of the word “husbandry” is “*field, orchard.*”² In the New Testament, Thayer stated, “a (cultivated) field: 1 Cor. 3:9 [*A. V. husbandry (with marg. tillage).*]³ Arndt and Gingrich define the word thus: “*cultivated land, field fig. of a Christian congregation as God’s field: 1 Cor. 3:9.*”⁴ Vine stated:

...denotes tillage, cultivation, husbandry, 1 Cor. 3:9, where the local church is described under this metaphor (A.V., marg., “tillage,” R.V. marg., “tilled land”), suggestive of the diligent toil of the Apostle and his fellow-missionaries, both in

the ministry of the gospel, and the care of the church at Corinth; suggestive, too, of the effects in spiritual fruitfulness.⁵

The word “vineyard” is translated from *ampelon*, simply meaning “vineyard.”⁶

The Work Of Viticulture

The great Messianic prophet, Isaiah, provides a beautiful description of viticulture. “My beloved had a vineyard in a fruitful hill” (Isa. 5:1). The level land was used for cereal crops; thus, hills were generally chosen for the vineyards (Psm. 80:10; Jer. 31:5). “And he digged it, and gathered out the stones thereof” (Isa. 5:2). Very careful preparation of the ground was made, wherein the sizeable stones were removed and the land was plowed. Additionally, a fence, stone wall, or hedge was erected to protect the vine from foxes (S. of Sol. 2:15), wild pigs (Psm. 80:13), and thieves (Jer. 49:9). “And planted it with the choicest vine” (Isa. 5:2). No mediocre vine would suffice. “And built a tower in the midst of it” (5:3). The towers were built of stone and afforded the guardians to be on the lookout for any type of marauder. “And also hewed out a winepress therein” (5:2). The winepress was generally hewn out of rock and was composed of two depressions, one of which was deeper than the other. People’s feet would tread out the juice, which would flow into the deeper depression. This process would normally be accompanied by shouts of joy (Jer. 48:33). “And he looked that it should bring forth grapes” (Isa. 5:2). Such bountiful harvest would call forth much labor. Solomon stated:

I went by the field of the slothful, and by the vineyard of the man void of understanding; and, lo, it was all grown over with thorns, and nettles had covered the face thereof, and the stone wall thereof was broken down (Prov. 24:30-31).

One immediately notes the necessity of maintaining the wall and of keeping the vineyard free of thorns and nettles. The work of growing vines demanded skill, which required preparation and constant vigilance.

The care of the vineyard also necessitated pruning off each useless branch, that is, sickly or feeble ones, so the sap could flow to healthy branches that would bear fruit. Christ emphasized this process (John 15:1-3). The vineyards would sometimes be cultivated by the owners themselves; at other times, they would be cared for by hired laborers (Matt. 20:1-16) or by tenants who would rent the vineyard (21:33-43). The owner would share in the fruits of the harvest (21:34).

The Church As God's Husbandry, God's Vineyard

God chose to give a number of descriptive titles to His church, each of which has real meaning and significance. There is no place for human names and designations, for they originate and perpetuate division. Two of these titles of the church are "husbandry" and "vineyard." Paul said to the Corinthians, "For we are God's fellow-workers: ye are God's husbandry, God's building" (1 Cor. 3:9). Jesus affirmed that the church was like unto a vineyard (Matt. 20:1). That God owns the vineyard is of great importance; it is His **land for tillage**. The church in Corinth was the husbandry where **God** had expended the labor of culture to produce fruit. God shows pleasure in regarding the church as His own people. Truly, the seed is God's, the Truth is God's, the wisdom is God's, and the purpose is God's—"ye are God's husbandry." Even the workers belong to God.

God is uniquely qualified to be the husbandman. First, having created us in His image, He knows the soil (Gen. 1:26-27). He knows man's spiritual needs and

capabilities. Second, He has all of the implements necessary to enable His vineyard to bear the fruits of the Spirit. The physical environment in which men live is ideal in assisting one to bear fruit. The seed of the kingdom, the Word of God (Luke 8:11), enables the Christian to be “perfect, throughly furnished unto every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Also, the love of God and of our Saviour is more than adequate motivation to enable God’s children to be “more than conquerors” (Rom. 8:33-39). Third, He commands all of the additional elements which enable the vineyard to yield pleasant fruit. Thus, the church belongs to God, it lives for His glory, and it wears His name (Rom. 16:16; Acts 4:12; 20:28).

The Problem In Corinth

In order to appreciate adequately Paul’s reference to “God’s husbandry” in 1 Corinthians 3:9, one must investigate the background situation. The tendency among the Greeks toward factions threatened to fracture the church in Corinth; each party had its favorite leader. They were boasting and quarreling, hardly characteristic of mature Christians: “For when one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not men?” (1 Cor. 3:4). Paul characterized them as being carnal, still babes in Christ. Thus, he was unable to feed them meat, for it would choke them. They were being guided by human passions, and the party controversies were evidence of carnality.

In order to alleviate the problem at Corinth, Paul insisted on the brotherhood of the saints, he emphasized the unity which must permeate the brethren, and he honored the one name (Acts 4:12), which is the court of highest appeal in things Divine. Compare one candle with another, but, when the sun rises, put out both the candles. He also moved to demonstrate that a divisive spirit would be further restrained by a correct view of Christian leaders

as serving God, not as commanding men. God's work is linked to man's work; however, God's work in the vineyard is so much greater and so much more magnificent that it is futile to weigh one man against another.

The Application

The Nature Of Man's Work

As in preparing, planting, watering, and pruning a vineyard, Christians, as laborers in the vineyard, have work to accomplish. God has never left mankind without work. Even in Eden, Adam and Eve were commanded "to dress and to keep" the garden (Gen. 2:15). Every child of God lives to promote the welfare of the kingdom and to work in the vineyard, to bear fruit (1 Cor. 15:58; Rom. 7:4). The work of each individual is vital. Christ teaches in Matthew 20:1-16 that those entering the kingdom with proper motives do so to labor, as well as to enjoy all spiritual blessings (Eph. 1:3). Some people desire to eat the grapes without working.

Each person's work in the vineyard is varied. Some plant and others water; not all can preach, or lead singing, or serve as elders. However, the work to be accomplished is so varied that each person can find his talents and desires fulfilled. Further, every sphere of work is important. No task can be safely left undone. Still further, no more honorable work can be found; no other labor can compare to working with God in His kingdom. It is wonderful to be a fellow-helper to the cause of Christ and a fellow-worker with God!

The fact that the place of work is the vineyard, God's husbandry, teaches that one must be in Christ's church to be saved. The householder hired "laborers into his vineyard" (Matt. 20:1). Salvation is in the church (2 Thess. 2:14), Christ is the "Saviour of the body" (Eph. 5:23), the

saved are added to the church (Acts 2:47), and man is to glorify God in the church (Eph. 3:21). God will not reward one who labors in another's vineyard!

Every person should enter the vineyard to work, as early in life as possible. Inasmuch as no one is guaranteed "tomorrow," one could die never having worked in the vineyard. Christ's parable in Matthew 20 does not teach "deathbed repentance," for those entering at the eleventh hour entered as soon as they received the invitation (Matt. 20:6-7).

Fellow-workers With One Another

In the husbandry of God, "he that planteth and he that watereth are one" (1 Cor. 3:8). Both Paul and Apollos were fellow-laborers in God's employ. Each contributed in his own way to the success of the vineyard. Christians are "fellow-workers for the truth" (3 John 8). The apostles "went forth and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them" (Mark 16:20). Christians must be characterized by unity, sympathy, good will, and mutual burden-bearing (Eph. 4:2-3; Gal. 6:2). As such, criticism and faultfinding would be nonexistent. None would give way to a party spirit.

In building Solomon's temple, seventy thousand men bore burdens; eighty thousand men hewed stones and wood in the remote mountains; and a few men worked in gold, silver, brass, and linen. Some areas of service were perhaps objects of more envy than others; however, each area of work was indispensable. The temple was completed, for each contributed what he could.

Fellow-workers With God

"For we are God's fellow-workers" (1 Cor. 3:9). We are in a Divine partnership with God, since it is His church, His husbandry. The relationship adds luster and dignity

to the service. How revolting is a party spirit when one realizes that Christians work with God and for the same results! God allows us to work with Him, though He is the owner and the husbandman, of course. We are dependent upon God; thus, our work is vain without Him. No room is left for pride. Moses tried to take matters into his own hands, killed the Egyptian, and fled to Midian. Another forty years were necessary to teach him dependence upon God. Only then could God use him (Exod. 2:11-14; 4:1-17). God was able powerfully to use Gideon, for Gideon realized his dependence upon God. He was least in his father's house and his family the poorest in Manasseh (Judg. 6:15). God could use Isaiah, for Isaiah's attitude was, "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man with unclean lips" (Isa. 6:5). These were called into God's fellowship and work.

God works with and through Christians in the development of character. God works through His Word to bring us to being beautiful with holiness. Again, God works with and through Christians in saving mankind. It is by the use of our hands, feet, and tongues that the saving power of God's Truth is carried to the world (Mark 16:15-16). It is thus that God transforms our weaknesses into strength.

In working with God, we must conform our lives and teaching to His will. One, the worker must be willing to suffer for the cause of Christ (1 Pet. 4:16). The true gardener undergoes perspiration and pain. Two, the worker must work in harmony with God's doctrine. Neither Paul nor Apollos had the authority to tamper with God's Word. They were nothing, compared to God (1 Cor. 3:7). The faithful servant "speaks as the oracles of God" (1 Pet. 4:11). He neither adds to nor takes from the inerrant Word (Rev. 22:18-19). One does not water down the Truth in an attempt to make it more palatable.

The Nature Of God's Work

God has always worked and is working today. God created the heaven and the earth and man. When man sinned, God promised salvation through Christ (Gen. 3:15). Christ was born of a virgin, lived a sinless life, died, arose, and ascended to the right hand of God, carrying to the mercy seat His blood, shed to purchase the church, God's husbandry (Acts 20:28). The Holy Spirit revealed the Word, which is the Sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17). Thus, the Word is empowered to save man (1 Pet. 1:22-23; Jas. 1:21). God gives man peace, hope, wisdom, salvation, and too many other blessings to enumerate (Eph. 1:3). And, His workers are beneficiaries of His providential care.

The Harvest

When the harvest is gathered, "Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit" (John 15:8). "These things [good works] are good and profitable unto men" (Tit. 3:8).

Christians are assured of victory, for we are working for and with God; He will triumph! Nothing can prevail against God's work (Matt. 16:18).

"All flesh is as grass, and all the glory thereof as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower falleth: But the word of the Lord abideth for ever" (1 Pet. 1:24-25).

One's reward after his work in the vineyard is completed is not based on time spent (Matt. 20) nor on visible results accomplished. He will be rewarded upon the basis of attitude shown and of efforts expended within the arena of his own ability, upon his having been a willing and faithful servant.

Conclusion

The following conclusions to the study on God's husbandry are appropriate. One, a proper understanding

of the vineyard and each Christian's place in it will alleviate strife and a party spirit. Two, each person's work in the vineyard is varied, yet indispensable. Three, one can engage in no greater or more honorable work than laboring in God's vineyard. Four, a person's labors are useless unless they are performed in the vineyard—the church of Christ. Five, one should enter the vineyard early in life (Heb. 3:7-8), while there is time and opportunity. Six, our labors are in vain without God. The laborer in the vineyard must not lose sight of the fact that “God gives the increase.” We have no cause to “glory, save in the cross of Christ” (Gal. 6:14). Seven, Christians are instruments used by God to carry the Gospel, God's power to save, to those who are so desperately in need of salvation. Eight, one must bring his character, his methods, and his doctrine into congruency with God's will, for God is the Master and Owner of the vineyard. The faithful servant ever beware of wresting the Scriptures to his own destruction (2 Pet. 3:16). Nine, “And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not” (Gal. 6:9). You can “know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58). Ten, you can enter the vineyard by hearing God's Word (Rom. 10:17), believing in Christ (Heb. 11:6), repenting of every sin (Luke 13:3), confessing Jesus as God's Son (Rom. 10:10), and being baptized into Christ, into the vineyard (Gal. 3:26-27; Rom. 6:3-4). Much of the **future** of the Lord's church depends upon what we do in His vineyard in the **present**.

Endnotes

1 The bulk of this material was originally published in **The Church--The Beautiful Bride Of Christ**, ed. Thomas B. Warren & Garland Elkins (Jonesboro: National Christian Press, 1980), pp. 218-224.

2 Henry George Liddell & Robert Scott, **A Greek-English Lexicon** (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 347.

3 Joseph Henry Thayer, **Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament** (New York: American Book Company, 1889), p 14.

4 William F Arndt & F. Wilbur Gingrich, **A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature** (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1963), p. 156.

5 W. E. Vine, **An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, II** (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1966), p. 241.

6 Ibid, p. 188; Thayer, p. 32

CHAPTER 22

**Pictures Of The Church:
The Pure
Bride Of Christ**

Garland Elkins

Israel, God's Bride Under The Old Testament¹

T*HE ABOVE IS CLEARLY* taught in the following passages:

Turn, O backsliding children, saith the Lord; for I am married unto you: and I will take you one of a city, and two of a family, and I will bring you to Zion (Jer. 3:14).

Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God (Rom. 7:4).

Israel was unfaithful to God, having compromised with idolatry. God saw their compromise and condemned it:

For the land is full of adulterers; for because of swearing the land mourneth; the pleasant places of the wilderness are dried up, and their course is evil, and their force is not right (Jer. 23:10).

I have seen also in the prophets of Jerusalem an horrible thing; they commit adultery, and walk

in lies: they strengthen also the hands of evildoers, that none doth return from his wickedness: they are all of them unto me as Sodom, and the inhabitants thereof as Gomorrah (23:14).

He warned them of the consequences of their sins and pronounced judgment against them:

The Lord said also unto me in the days of Josiah the king, Hast thou seen that which backsliding Israel hath done? she is gone up upon every high mountain and under every green tree, and there hath played the harlot. And I said after she had done all these things, Turn thou unto me. But she returned not. And her treacherous sister Judah saw it. And I saw, when for all the causes whereby backsliding Israel committed adultery I had put her away, and given her a bill of divorce; yet her treacherous sister Judah feared not, but went and played the harlot also. And it came to pass through the lightness of her whoredom, that she defiled the land, and committed adultery with stones and with stocks. And yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah hath not turned unto me with her whole heart, but feignedly, saith the Lord. And the Lord said unto me, The backsliding Israel hath justified herself more than treacherous Judah (3:6-11).

Therefore thus saith the Lord of hosts concerning the prophets; Behold, I will feed them with wormwood, and make them drink the water of gall: for from the prophets of Jerusalem is profaneness gone forth into all the land (23:15).

Behold, a whirlwind of the Lord is gone forth in fury, even a grievous whirlwind: it shall fall grievously upon the head of the wicked (23:19).

God's people committed two basic sins: "For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water" (2:13). Having forgotten God and committed these two great evils, God, nevertheless, continued to plead with His bride to repent:

Go and proclaim these words toward the north, and say, Return, thou backsliding Israel, saith the Lord; and I will not cause mine anger to fall upon you: for I am merciful, saith the Lord, and I will not keep anger for ever. Only acknowledge thine iniquity, that thou hast transgressed against the Lord thy God, and hast scattered thy ways to the strangers under every green tree, and ye have not obeyed my voice, saith the Lord. Turn, O backsliding children, saith the Lord; for I am married unto you: and I will take you one of a city, and two of a family, and I will bring you to Zion (3:12-14).

Since they failed to accept His mercy and longsuffering, He announced that retribution must fall upon them:

And the burden of the Lord shall ye mention no more: for every man's word shall be his burden; for ye have perverted the words of the living God, of the Lord of hosts our God. Thus shalt thou say to the prophet, What hath the Lord answered thee? and, What hath the Lord spoken? But since ye say, The burden of the Lord; therefore thus saith the Lord; Because ye say this word, The burden of the Lord, and I have sent unto you, saying, Ye shall not say, The burden of the Lord; Therefore, behold, I, even I, will utterly forget you, and I will forsake you, and the city that I

gave you and your fathers, and cast you out of my presence: And I will bring an everlasting reproach upon you, and a perpetual shame, which shall not be forgotten (23:36-40).

Jews Free To Marry Again

The Jews, so long as the Law of Moses was in existence, were married to that Law as their husband. Paul thus argues in Romans 7:1-4:

Know ye not, brethren, (for I speak to them that know the law), how that the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth? For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man. Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God.

If during its continuation they had been married to another law, they would have been guilty of spiritual adultery; but, if the first law be blotted out or done away, then they are loosed from it and are not adulterers, though they be married to another law or another man. Paul, therefore, said, "Wherefore, my brethren ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God" (7:4). They were married unto what other? Unto "him," but what

“him”? The answer is “even to him who is raised from the dead.” They were not married to Jesus while He lived upon the earth, but married to Him that “is raised from the dead.” It is an impossibility for anyone to prove that marriage was consummated between Christ and the church previous to the resurrection of the Son of God from the dead.

What is the objective? Paul teaches them that they are married unto Him Who is raised from the dead. He affirms that one of the purposes of this marriage is “that we should bring forth fruit unto God.” The church of Christ, having become married unto Christ, has the right to take upon itself the name of the husband; and the children that result from this union have the right to take the name of the husband. They become the beneficiaries of the Son of God by virtue of the fact that they are born into His family and, as Paul said, because “we are members of his body” (Eph. 5:30).

It is our highest privilege to become and be members of the body of Christ, a part of the Lamb’s wife. It is our privilege to take upon ourselves the name of the husband of this spiritual institution and to be loyal unto Him who died that we might live. Our purpose must ever be to live in submission to His will; to look to Him for guidance and direction as set out in His word; and, as obedient children, to submit to Him in all things, always remembering the truth set out in the following passages:

Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him (Heb. 5:8-9).

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven (Matt. 7:21).

Christ And The Church

All need to know and appreciate the very close relationship and the wonderful parallel between husband and wife and Christ and the church. It was predicted by Isaiah that God's people should have a name better than son or daughter, suggestive of a more Divine union, and that one term is "wife":

Even unto them will I give in mine house and within my walls a place and a name better than of sons and of daughters: I will give them an everlasting name, that shall not be cut off (Isa. 56:5).

And ye shall leave your name for a curse unto my chosen: for the Lord God shall slay thee, and call his servants by another name (65:15).

For Zion's sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth. And the Gentiles shall see thy righteousness, and all kings thy glory: and thou shalt be called by a new name, which the mouth of the Lord shall name (62:1-2).

I call attention to the facts. **First**, a new name was to be given within God's house. This name was to be better than the name of sons and daughters. **Second**, this new name was to be an everlasting name that shall not be cut off or changed. **Third**, the name was to be given to both Gentiles and Jews; thus both were to be God's people. **Fourth**, this name was to be given by God Himself. Thus, after both Jews and Gentiles were one in Christ, the new name, "Christian," was given for both Jews and Gentiles who became children of God.

The name Christian is a divinely called name:

And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch (Acts 11:26).

The name Christian was given to be worn by individual members of the church. Hence, the church was referred to as the “church of God” (1 Cor. 1:1-2), “the church of the Lord” (Acts 20:28), and other designations. It is most often simply referred to as “the church.” When speaking of a plurality of congregations, Paul said that they were “churches of Christ” (Rom. 16:16).

The Betrothal

Before the consummation of the marriage between Christ and the church, there must be the betrothal: “For I am jealous over you with a godly jealousy: for I espoused you to one husband, that I might present you as a pure virgin to Christ” (2 Cor. 11:2).

There Is One Bride— One New Testament Church

The New Testament, of course, will be the standard to which we must turn for our evidence. The word “church” comes from the Greek word *ekklesia* and simply means the “called out.” The church of the New Testament was composed of people—people who were called out of darkness into the light of the Son of God. Such a group of “called out” people in any locality was called the “church” in that community. Hence, we read of the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 1:2), the church at Thessalonica (1 Thess. 1:1), the

churches of Galatia (Gal. 1:2), and such like. The church of the New Testament was, therefore, composed of literal human beings. The congregations that composed it were literal congregations on the earth.

This idea that the church was a “mystical organism” composed of the saved in every denomination, as some have asserted, is without any foundation in the Word of God. That there was only one church in the New Testament is shown by the following:

1. *The church is the bride of Christ.* John the Baptist said, “He that hath the bride is the bridegroom” (John 3:29). Paul told the brethren who composed the church at Rome that they had “become dead to the law” and that they “should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead” (Rom. 7:4). And, to the church at Ephesus, he said, “For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the savior of the body” (Eph 5:23). Thus we learn that Christ is the husband, and the church is the bride. As there is just one husband, so there is just one bride. The church—the bride of Christ—is, therefore, the exclusive New Testament church.

2. *Christ owns the church.* Christ promised to build but one church when He said, “Upon this rock I will build **my church**” (Matt. 16:18). In the language of Paul, we are told that He died for but one: “Christ also loved **the church** and gave himself for **it**” (Eph. 5:25). The words “the church” mean but one. And the pronoun “it” can refer to but one. So Christ loved **one** church; He died for **one** church; He built **one** church. Hence, He is the owner of **but one church**—the exclusive church of the New Testament. The plural form “churches” is never used except in reference to a number of local congregations in some section of the country, as “the churches of Judaea” (Gal. 1:22) and “the churches of Macedonia” (2 Cor. 8:1).

3. *The church is the body of Christ.* Paul, in Ephesians 1:22-23, said that God “gave him to be the head over all things to **the church, which is his body.**” He also said, “He is the head of **the** body, the church” (Col. 1:18). In one passage, Paul says, “the church” is “his body,” and in the other he says, “the body, the church.” You may speak of it in both ways—the body is the church, or the church is the body. To all people who can and will take the Bible as their only rule, it is evident that the church is the body of Christ. But men who cannot take the Bible as their only rule will have to interpret this to mean something else.

Not only does the Bible tell us that the church is the body of Christ, but it also tells us that it is an exclusive body—that there is one body. In Ephesians 4, Paul listed seven elements in the unity of the Spirit: “one God, one Lord, one Spirit, one hope, one faith, one baptism and one body.” In the fourth verse, he plainly says, “There is one body.” If the “one God” is an exclusive God, and the “**one Lord**” is an exclusive Lord, then the “one body” is an exclusive body. In 1 Corinthians 12:20, Paul declared: “But now are they many members, yet but **one body.**” **Since there is “but one body” and “the body is the church,” then there must be “but one church” of the New Testament.**

Paul beautifully set out this relationship: “For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body” (Eph. 5:23). Just as husband and wife forsake all things and become one, and thus blend their lives into one, even so every Christian must do the same:

And there came unto him Pharisees, trying him, and saying, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? And he answered and

said, Have ye not read, that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh? So that they are no more two, but one flesh. (Matt. 19:3-6).

We must forsake all and blend our lives into that of the Lord Jesus Christ—He being the husband, and the church His bride. The marriage thus consummated as the church of Christ, the bride or church is under the head of Jesus our Lord.

In the beginning God brought Adam into existence. He then made a help meet for him. Adam was put to sleep; then his side was opened; a rib was taken; the woman was then brought into existence. Then Adam and Eve, as husband and wife, were commanded to multiply and replenish the earth. Just as Eve was brought into existence according to the process described, in later centuries, when man was ready and the time was ripe for the great Truth, the church was to be formed. As a deep sleep came over Adam, even so, after Christ had lived upon the earth for about a third of a century, thus fulfilling the predictions of the ancient prophets regarding Him, He was crucified. While He slept the sleep of death, a Roman soldier, who was standing nearby injected a spear into His side and opened up the literal flesh of the body of Christ, and from His side there came forth His precious blood which was to purchase the church, as we learn from the following passages:

Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit hath made you bishops, to feed the church of the Lord which he purchased with his own blood (Acts 20:28).

Knowing that ye were redeemed, not with corruptible things, with silver or gold, from your vain manner of life handed down from your fathers; but with precious blood, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot, even the blood of Christ (1 Pet. 1:18-19).

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself up for it (Eph. 5:25).

Thus the spiritual bride, the church, was purchased by the precious blood of Christ. After the price was paid, and the sacrifice was made, then the next step was that the woman, or bride of Christ, was brought into existence; and then it was therefore (and thereafter) to be characterized as the wife of Christ, the marriage having been consummated. The results are that spiritual children shall thereafter be born of that union and into that family.

It should be pointed out that it was impossible for woman to have been created previous to the opening of Adam's side and the taking of the rib from which she was made. In like manner, it is equally an absolute impossibility for the church of Christ to have been brought into existence previous to the shedding of the blood of the Son of God.

Sometimes there are those who say, "But Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for it." Therefore, it must have been in existence or He could not have given Himself up for it. The answer is this: that of which the church was ultimately to be formed was in existence prior to the death of Christ—namely men and women who had left their respective places to follow after Christ—but they were not at that time characterized as His wife or church. They did not become such until Christ died, made the sacrifice, and gave Himself for them. Then they became His wife or bride.

Perhaps the following illustration makes the point clear. A young man falls in love with a young woman; he is willing to forsake father and mother and all things else that stand in the way of their marriage. Note, however, this vital point: she was **in** existence as a young lady, but she was not his wife, and did not become such until after he forsook all, pledged his life, and gave himself for her. Just so with respect to the church of the Lord. Human beings, out of which the church was formed, were in existence before they were in existence as the church; but they were not in existence as the wife, the bride, and the church of Christ until Jesus Christ purchased them, and the marriage was consummated. Then, the relationship of Christ to the church was parallel to the husband to the wife:

Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God (Rom. 7:4).

Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body (Eph. 5:22-23).

The Church Must Be Pure To Be Beautiful

The church must be pure to be beautiful. Paul wrote:

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not

having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish (Eph 5:25-27).

Every Christian, and, therefore, the entire church, must “adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things” (Tit. 2:10). God commands us to preach and teach sound doctrine:

I charge thee in the sight of God, and of Christ Jesus, who shall judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be urgent in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure the sound doctrine; but, having itching ears, will heap to themselves teachers after their own lusts; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and turn aside unto fables (2 Tim. 4:1-4).

The church must be kept beautiful. The following are a few of the many requirements for both the individual Christian and the entire church to remain beautiful:

1. *We must maintain proper priorities.* Jesus said, “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matt. 6:33). We must renounce all that stands between us and faithfulness to Christ: “So therefore whosoever he be of you that renounceth not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33).

2. *We must practice the highest of moral standards.* The line of demarcation between the church and the world must ever be wide and deep. We simply must not love the world. It is a fact that we cannot love the world without becoming an enemy of God (Jas. 4:4; 1 John 2:15-17).

3. *The church remains the beautiful bride of Christ by administrating both preventive and corrective discipline* (Prov. 13:24; 19:18; 22:15; 29:15-17; 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 2 Thess. 3:6; Rom. 16:17-18; Tit. 3:10-11).

4. *We must train our children properly.*

Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honour thy father and mother; (which is the first commandment with promise;) That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth. And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and the admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:1-4).

5. *Christians must be cooperative:*

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord (1 Cor. 15:58).

For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building (3:9).

6. *Christians must live a life of purity:*

Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world (Jas. 1:27).

Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded (4:8).

7. *The Bride, in order to maintain the beauty of holiness, must know, believe, obey, and advocate*

sound doctrine. Jesus had a doctrine and taught it during His personal ministry: “And he taught them many things by parables, and unto them in his doctrine” (Mark 4:2; 12:38). He said, “my doctrine is not mine” (John 7:16); “The high priest then asked Jesus...of his doctrine” (18:19). The early church knew, followed, and taught sound doctrine. They “continued steadfastly in the apostles doctrine” (Acts 2:42). The priests accused the apostles of filling Jerusalem “with your doctrine” (5:28). Sergius Paulus was “astonished at the doctrine of the Lord” (13:12).

Paul instructed Timothy to “charge certain men not to teach another doctrine” (1 Tim. 1:3). He then names a number of things that are “contrary to the sound doctrine” (1:10). Paul admonished Timothy to give heed to “reading, to exhortation, to doctrine,” and to “take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine” (4:13,16); “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine” (2 Tim. 3:16).

Unfortunately, some will not endure “sound doctrine” (4:3). An elder must meet the qualifications of Titus 1:9: “Holding to the faithful word which is according to the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in the sound doctrine, and to convict the gainsayers.” Titus was admonished, “But speak thou the things which befit the sound doctrine” (2:1).

The Bible warns of false doctrines and false teachers. Jesus warned, “beware of false prophets” (Matt. 7:15). He warned that some teach “for doctrines the commandments of men” (15:9). He warned His disciples against the “leaven” (doctrine) of the Pharisees and Sadducees (16:6-11). Elymas sought to pervert the right way of the Lord (Acts 13:10). From time to time Paul warned the elders from Ephesus of false teachers that would arise both from within and without the church (20:28-32). Corinth was

plagued with false apostles and deceitful workers (2 Cor. 11:13-15). There were among the Galatians perverters of the Gospel (Gal. 1:6-9). In Paul's day there were many that would not walk by the same rule but were enemies of the cross of Christ (Phil. 3:15-19). There were some who were attempting to turn men from the true doctrine by sleight and cunning (Eph. 4:14). There are those who teach the doctrine of the devil (1 Tim. 4:1-4). It is very important to both know and believe and love the Truth, for men can believe a lie (false doctrine) and be damned (2 Thess. 2:8-12).

Therefore, it is of the utmost importance that we both follow and speak sound doctrine: "Hold the pattern of sound words which thou hast heard from me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 1:13). This is of supreme importance since those who fail to abide in the doctrine of Christ forfeit the approval of God by going beyond the doctrine of Christ:

Whosoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God: he that abideth in the teaching, the same hath both the Father and the Son. If any one cometh unto you, and bringeth not this teaching, receive him not into your house, and give him no greeting: for he that giveth him greeting partaketh in his evil works (2 John 9-11).

8. *The bride must ever remember her wedding day and be faithful to her vows.* "Can a maid forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire? yet my people have forgotten me days without number" (Jer. 2:32).

9. *The bride must be pure in order that she may be presented to Christ and then live with Him throughout eternity.*

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself up for it; that

he might sanctify it, having cleansed it by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish (Eph. 5:25-27).

Conclusion

The Lord's church began on the first Pentecost following the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Pentecost, of course, was an important feast day of the Jews, and it was on that day that the church of our Lord had its beginning.

But I would like to suggest to you in summation of our lesson that the church of the New Testament is not a denomination. It can be reproduced in any and every part of the world by following the pattern set out in the New Testament, for its terms of entrance, its worship, its moral and ethical requirements, its mission, and its destiny are clearly pointed out in the New Testament.

God expects us to love the Truth and to obey it. It is our most earnest desire that all professed Christians shall be content with no name but Christian, no creed but the Christ, and no book but the Bible.

Let me urge you to become a Christian through hearing the Word of the Gospel and believing it (Acts 15:7-9), by penitently turning from all sin (Luke 13:3), by confessing that Christ is the Son of God (Acts 8:37; Matt. 10:32), and by being baptized that you might be saved. Jesus said in Mark 16:16, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned." As an erring child of God, one must repent, confess sins, and ask the forgiveness of God and the church (Acts 8:20-23; 1 John 1:7-9; Jas. 5:16).

If you are faithful, continue to seek those things which are above (Col. 3:1-2). Remember: our Father is in heaven (Matt. 6:9). Our citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20). Our inheritance is in heaven (1 Pet. 1:4). Our names are recorded in heaven (Heb. 12:23). Our treasures are in heaven (Matt. 6:19-21).

Endnote

1 This material was originally published in **The Church--The Beautiful Bride Of Christ**, ed. Thomas B. Warren & Garland Elkins (Jonesboro: National Christian Press, 1980), pp. 176-185.

CHAPTER 23

The Growth Of The Lord's Church: Past, Present, Future

Bill Bryant

Introduction

THERE ARE VERY FEW religious subjects that have been more popular in recent years than the subject of church growth. Religious bookstores continue to fill their shelves with church growth books containing the latest fads and notions for those who are frantically grasping for success. The study of church growth is indeed a vital study. What true Christian would not want to see the New Testament church grow and prosper?

But current ideas and opinions on church growth are normally limited to numerical success. God's standard of success in church growth, however, goes far beyond mere numbers. Therefore, important questions should be asked and answered in light of the greatest church growth manual in all the world, the Bible. What kind of church growth does God desire? How can it be accomplished? Who can help to bring it about? Why are so many congregations dying instead of growing? When will things turn from the current disturbing trend towards liberalism, which many believe offers the greatest potential for church growth? All of these questions can be answered when comparisons are made between today's church and the first-century

church described in the New Testament. Going back is indeed the first step in our going forward to true Biblical church growth. May all of us have the courage to “examine ourselves, whether we be in the faith” (2 Cor. 13:5).

The Obligation Of The Church To Grow

Jesus, in the Great Commission, clearly defines the work of the church:

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen. (Matt. 28:19-20).

The Great Commission cannot be obeyed without experiencing church growth, both numerical and spiritual. The apostle Peter concluded his second and final letter with the command to “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18). He admonished Christians in his first epistle to desire the sincere milk of the Word of God “that ye may grow thereby” (1 Pet. 2:2). The apostle Paul echoed the same sentiment that all would “grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ” (Eph. 4:15). In fact, Christians were even condemned for their lack of growth (Heb. 5:12-14).

No Christian or congregation can remain static. People are either on the move for the Master or in the process of denying the faith. Every Bible verse has been recorded with the spiritual growth of the child of God in mind, which will result in numerical growth. It is sad and sinful to see the attitude of some among us who do not want the church to grow because it would upset the status quo in a congregation. With the right kind of Gospel

preaching, Christians will want to see the church grow and expect it to grow.

The Lord's church is truly the greatest institution in all the world. Its great value is seen in its purchase price, the blood of Christ Himself (Acts 20:28). The church is a vital part of God's "eternal purpose" (Eph. 3:11). God's manifold wisdom is to be made known through it to the "principalities and powers in heavenly places" (3:10). God's great glory is to be made known through it as well (3:21). It deserves and demands our very best.

Past Church Growth

Even though spiritual growth and development are the first priorities in church growth, the New Testament records the amazing numerical growth of the first-century church:

Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls (Acts 2:41).

Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved (2:47).

Howbeit many of them which heard the word believed; and the number of the men was about five thousand (4:4).

And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women (5:14).

And in those days, when the number of the disciples were multiplied... (6:1).

And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly (6:7).

Then had the churches rest throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied (9:31).

And it was known throughout all Joppa; and many believed in the Lord (9:42).

And the hand of the Lord was with them: and a great number believed, and turned unto the Lord (11:21).

And it came to pass in Iconium, that they went both together into the synagogue of the Jews, and so spake, that a great multitude both of the Jews and also of the Greeks believed (14:1).

And so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily (16:5).

And some of them believed, and consorted with Paul and Silas; and of the devout Greeks a great multitude, and of the chief women not a few (17:4).

Therefore many of them believed; also of honourable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few (17:12).

... and many of the Corinthians hearing believed, and were baptized (18:8).

It must be remembered that these references to numerical growth are not accidental. The Holy Spirit included them for good reason in the inspired text. The early church grew by leaps and bounds, even in the face of intense persecution. Imagine how quickly church

membership rolls would thin out today under the methods and intensity of persecution known by the first-century church.

First-century church growth was certainly not limited to numerical growth. From the books of Acts through Revelation, passage after passage records the deeds and sacrifices offered by grateful hearts who considered it an honor to live and die as Christians. Persecution drove them all over the Roman Empire. But they did not leave their homelands with sealed lips and broken hearts. As they were scattered they "went everywhere preaching the word" (Acts 8:4). The first generation of the Lord's church took church growth and the Great Commission seriously. By the time the apostle Paul penned the Colossian letter, the Gospel had been preached to every creature under heaven (Col. 1:23). Such could only be accomplished by those who were willing to present themselves as living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1), dedicated to committing the Truth to faithful men who would be willing to teach others also (2 Tim. 2:2).

Present Church Growth (20th Century)

The growth rate of the Lord's church in this country has varied greatly over the course of the twentieth century. J. W. Shepherd reported the Lord's church to have 159,658 members in 2,649 congregations in 33 states in 1906. This was shortly after the division which resulted in the formation of the Christian church. From 1906 to 1956 there was an increase in membership in churches of Christ of 96.48%, which was over twice the percentage of increase of the next fastest-growing religious body. This made the Lord's church the ninth largest religious body in the United States. Another reference reported a 135% increase of membership between 1950 and 1965.¹

Over the last two decades, the growth rate of the church has declined significantly. Mac Lynn's research reported the Lord's church to have 1,240,820 members in 12,762 congregations in 1979. In 1997, he reported the church to have 1,255,834 members in 13,080 congregations. This represents a 2.5% increase in the number of congregations and a 1.2% increase in membership over 18 years.² If these figures are accurate, it means each congregation gained only one member, on average, in 18 years of following the Great Commission. What a tragic commentary on the state of the church for which Christ shed His precious blood! Please note, as well, that a significant percentage of members of the Lord's church counted in the 1997 census would strongly disagree on a number of doctrinal points taught clearly in the New Testament that were embraced by the church in 1979. No wonder our country is in such great moral decline. Instead of advancing the borders of the kingdom, as a mighty army vanquishing every foe, we are not even holding the front lines!

I cannot help but think, as we stand at the brink of the new millennium, how God must have felt when the children of Israel stood at the edge of the Promised Land and were afraid to engage the enemy (Num. 13-14). They had been delivered from the bonds of Egypt by an all-powerful God for a purpose, but their faith failed them. God turned them back into the wilderness and raised up another generation that would be willing and worthy of being called His children. What will He do with those in His church today who are promised blessing and privilege but have no taste for battle? Will He not turn us back into the wilderness of bitterness and despair and raise up another generation who will seek first and foremost that heavenly city (Heb. 11:13-17), who will spend and be spent for the sake of the glorious Gospel, and who truly believe that one precious soul is worth more than all the riches of the world?

Church growth that would please and honor our gracious God and Father is possible today, but it will not come without blood, sweat, and tears. It will require our serious consideration and practice of the Biblical principles of church growth that are clearly made known in the New Testament. May all of us have the fervent desire to learn them and then to live them.

Biblical Principles For Future Church Growth

The Lord's church today faces numerous problems of its own making. Unfortunately, many have followed the mistakes of other generations when things were not right with the church. They have sought to change the pattern authored by God instead of preaching to change people (Acts 17:30; 1 Pet. 4:11; Rom. 8:29; 12:2). Many have created their own system of doing things, heavily influenced by worldly wisdom found and favored in denominations. The solution is to return to God's Word to find the true pattern for the church. Therein will all find its true mission, along with principles of church growth that will work in any and every generation. When we learn what is right with the church—that is, the Lord and His perfect plan and pattern—then we can begin to change what is wrong with the church—its people. There are a number of key Biblical principles that, if faithfully followed, will bring about true church growth. The following principles are humbly and prayerfully presented for your serious consideration and study. They were selected because they seem, to this writer, to have received insufficient attention in recent years by the brotherhood at large.

1. *The principle of purpose:* Any organization, to be successful, must have a clear understanding of its purpose for existence. This is true for the government, the military, business applications, athletic teams, and

especially is it true for the Lord's church. For several years of my life, I served the U.S. Navy as a nuclear operator on submarine patrols. I can still recall the meetings held shortly after we put out to sea where the captain would tell us our mission. He wanted us to understand its importance and to know that decisions would be made that would best accomplish that mission, even if it required great personal sacrifice by the crew. We were told often that we had a purpose for being there. The national security of our beloved country was at stake, and we were going to carry out our assigned mission at all costs. He reminded us that each person had an important job to do and would be held accountable. He kept his word.

Every organization must clearly understand its purpose, or mission. It must then determine how well it is accomplishing that purpose and strive diligently to overcome any shortcoming. If someone followed the average member of the Lord's church around and monitored closely his speech and actions throughout his worship and daily life, what would one determine to be his purpose in life? For years, it seems that church attendance has been the prevailing standard by which church members are considered faithful. As long as a brother or sister is attending regularly on Sunday morning, criticism and condemnation will rarely be heard. Please be aware that I am certainly not discounting the importance of church attendance. It is important! We sin if we fail to attend as directed (Heb. 10:25), but is church attendance the end purpose or goal, or is it a means to the end?

What is the purpose of the church? Why does it exist? What is the purpose of each member? The answers to these questions go far beyond church attendance. The apostle Paul wrote concerning the church:

To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, according to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord (Eph. 3:10-11).

This passage plainly shows the church of our Lord to be a part of God's eternal purpose and to be that through which His manifold wisdom is to be made known. Later on, Paul pens the phrase, "Unto him be glory in the church" (3:21). We learn from this passage that our Almighty God has chosen the church to be the means through which His great and majestic glory is to be made known in the world.

The subject of glorifying God is a consistent theme throughout the New Testament. Christians are told specifically how they can glorify God and thus accomplish a great purpose in their lives. We glorify God when we offer praise to Him (Psm. 50:23), by our good works (Matt. 5:16), by bearing fruit (John 15:8), by our confident prayer (John 14:13), by our strong faith (Rom. 4:20), by keeping our bodies pure (1 Cor. 6:19-20), by speaking only the oracles of God (1 Pet. 4:11), and by our willingness to suffer for His cause (4:16).

How can we briefly state the operational purpose of the church? Each one of the things mentioned in the previous paragraph that will glorify God is important, but what will motivate the child of God to seek such a mature lifestyle? What great mission is to be held up as the all-encompassing theme that will give order and meaning to the church? This purpose is clearly found in the Great Commission. Matthew records the operational purpose of the church given by the Savior Himself immediately prior to His ascension:

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son,

and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen (Matt. 28:19-20).

Please do not dismiss the great importance of this familiar passage. It emphasizes evangelism and edification. Evangelism will lead to converts, to numerical growth. Almost all understand the evangelism aspect of the Great Commission, though they may not be willing to obey it. Then there is edification—that is, teaching every disciple to observe all that the Lord commanded. Why so? This is where things truly begin to break down in the actual practice of Christianity for too many Christians!

In Colossians 1:27-28, Paul clearly expresses why he preaches, teaches and warns about Christ Jesus: “that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.” The apostle Paul, of course, is not referring to a state of sinless perfection for no one can attain such (1 John 1:8-10), but he is referring to a state of maturity, or completeness, in the Lord. On one occasion, Paul informs us that the very purpose of the Word of God is to accomplish such perfection. He wrote:

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

In the book of Ephesians, Paul reminds us that spiritual gifts were originally given “for the perfecting of the saints” (Eph. 4:7-12). The Lord desired that all would come to the knowledge of the Son of God “unto a perfect man” (4:13). God would even allow unfortunate circumstances and suffering to come upon His beloved

children because of the patience that would be produced that would eventually lead to our perfection (Jas. 1:4). How high and holy should the goal of maturity be? Jesus' answer is found in Matthew 5:48: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." These passages may be familiar to many but are obeyed by very few. A major problem in the church is that so many Christians act as if striving for maturity and completeness in Christ is an option. This attitude not only manifests itself in the failure to develop a Christ-like spirit, but also in the failure to be "thoroughly furnished unto all good works," as each Christian is commanded to do (2 Tim. 3:17).

If an independent evaluation team visited a local congregation and evaluated how well each member attempted to accomplish the mission and purpose of the Lord's church, what would it find? How would the average member fare if the checklist involved the following items?

1. is actively involved in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20);
2. loves the Lord with all of his heart, soul, and mind (22:37);
3. loves his neighbor as himself (22:38);
4. seeks first the kingdom of God (6:33);
5. studies the Bible to show himself approved unto God (2 Tim. 2:15);
6. is an active part of God's workmanship (Eph. 2:10);
7. earnestly contends for the faith (Jude 3);
8. is prepared to give an answer for his Christian hope (1 Pet. 3:15);
9. knows how and is willing to restore those overtaken in a fault (Gal. 6:1);
10. knows how and is willing to teach (Heb. 5:12);
11. does not forsake the assembly (10:25);
12. teaches his children daily (Deut. 6:7);
13. utilizes his talents for the Lord (Matt. 25:14-30);

14. is willing to give food and drink to the hungry and thirsty, to take in strangers, to clothe the naked, to visit the sick and those in prison (25:31-46);
15. obeys them that have the rule over him (Heb. 13:17);
16. has bridled his tongue (Jas. 3:3ff);
17. prays without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17);
18. abstains from all appearance of evil (5:22);
19. has humbled himself in the sight of the Lord (Jas. 4:10);
20. has presented his body as a living sacrifice (Rom. 12:1);
21. has not conformed to the world (12:2).

These items, and the hundreds of other Bible commands not listed, are all a part of carrying out the great purpose of the church.

A number of questions could be asked on a congregational level as well. How well does the congregation train and equip its people to carry out the great mission and purpose of the church? How capable would the average member be after twenty years in the educational program of the average church, coupled with his own individual Bible study? Joe Ellis makes a surprising point in one of his books on church growth:

The forty-year-old Christian who has been consistently active in the normal program of a congregation since age eighteen has been exposed to more than 4,000 hours of preaching and teaching. That same eighteen-year-old could have received a bachelor's degree in 1,800 hours of college classroom instruction, a Master of Divinity in an additional 1,350 hours, and a doctorate in a total of 4,000 hours.³

I am afraid that many would be in shock if they knew how little Bible knowledge the average forty-year-old

Christian has after years of instruction. Many still have a difficult time even naming the sixty-six books of the Bible. Why is this the case? The principle of purpose is ignored or forgotten. Church attendance is stressed, and it should be. However, little emphasis is given as to why it is important and how it fits into the overall purpose of the church.

People need to be taught the power of purpose. They need to be shown the life of Jesus and His level of commitment to the purpose that brought Him to mankind. He stated on one occasion, "For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). Nothing slowed Him from that purpose, not even misguided friends and disciples. When Peter balked at the news that He would go unto Jerusalem and suffer many things and be killed, the Lord told Peter, "Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men" (Matt. 16:23). No friend or foe could keep Him from His important work. He could pray truthfully to the Father at the end of His public ministry, "I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do" (John 17:4). It will take great teaching and preaching to bring about that kind of response in human hearts, which brings us to the second important principle of church growth.

2. *The principle of proclamation:* The Great Commission cannot be accomplished without proclaiming the Word of God. The Lord said, "Go ye therefore and teach all nations...teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you..." (Matt. 28:19-20). Our world so desperately needs to hear the Gospel proclaimed. Lives will not change without it. The Gospel is "the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth" (Rom. 1:16). Paul also wrote, "For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us

which are saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18). The Hebrews writer said of its power, “For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword...” (Heb. 4:12). At the apostle Paul’s final meeting with the Ephesian elders, at Miletus, he told them, “I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified” (Acts 20:32). Dozens of passages could be quoted that make known the power and influence the Gospel can have in the lives of those who fully embrace it.

As one reads the New Testament, he should be impressed by the tremendous priority the Lord has given to the proclamation of His Word. Anyone seeking to please God and willing to work for the growth of the church should do everything possible to plant the seed of the Word of God into human hearts, especially those who are lost. But this is not the case in many of the churches throughout the land. It’s show time! People are clamoring to be entertained. Concerts, drama, wrestling matches, clowns, and magicians fuel the emotions of those who will never be satisfied. Churches are being turned into amusement parlors. The biggest sin in many places is committed by the preacher who preaches too long for those who are in a hurry to arrive at the local eating establishment ahead of the crowd. These people want to be fed, but not by the food that would nourish their souls.

Only the Word of God can convince and convert sinners. The apostles certainly realized this to be true. When references are made to numerical and spiritual growth of the church in the book of Acts, one often finds the proclamation of the Word mentioned in the context (Acts 2:41; 4:4; 6:7; 9:31; 11:20-22; 14:1; 17:11-12; 18:5-8). Church growth will always be proportional to the preaching of the Gospel. That is why the apostles were found daily in the temple and in every house teaching and preaching Jesus Christ (5:42).

Not only was the Truth boldly proclaimed, but all of it was proclaimed. The apostle Paul declared, "For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God" (20:27). Every Gospel preacher worth his salt will do the same. The apostles kept back nothing that was profitable and were willing to teach publicly and from house to house (20:20). This is not the case in a number of congregations today! There are preachers among us who may not directly preach error, but they are as silent as the tomb on certain doctrinal issues. Bible texts are ignored that might offend the membership and pose the risk of losing members. There will always be itching ears, but preachers will always have the same directive from Holy Scripture, "Preach the word..." (2 Tim. 4:2).

Only the Word of God can weed out the committed from the uncommitted. It invites people to count the cost before they decide to become disciples (Luke 9:23; 14:25-35). As A. W. Tozer said, "God wants us all, and He will not rest till He gets us all. No part of the man will do." The Gospel also warns the Christian not to look back once he has become a disciple, lest he become no longer fit for the kingdom of God (Luke 9:62). It requires true commitment to wage a relentless war against error, boldly defending the Truth in a world that seems to despise authority, especially in spiritual matters. Unfortunately, many have traded in their armor in search for a worldly standard of success. John MacArthur makes some excellent points regarding true success:

External criteria such as affluence, numbers, money, or positive response have never been the Biblical measure of success in ministry. Faithfulness, godliness, and spiritual commitment are the virtues God esteems—and such qualities should be the building blocks of any ministry

philosophy. That is true in both small and large churches. Size does not signify God's blessing. And popularity is no barometer of success...Look again at Paul's instructions to Timothy. Instead of urging Timothy to devise a ministry that would garner accolades from the world, he warned him about suffering and hardship—hardly the stuff of modern church-growth experts' aspirations...Real success is not getting results at any cost. It is not prosperity, power, prominence, popularity, or any of the other worldly notions of success. Real success is doing the will of God regardless of the consequences.⁴

We mentioned earlier the tremendous growth rate the Lord's church experienced during the 1940's through the 1960's. The church was far more willing then to defend the faith in the public arena, and often did. The overall opinion of the world towards the church was far lower than now. As our popularity went up, our growth rate went down. The opposite is also true. It reminds me of a statement made by Vance Havner:

As long as the church wore scars, they made headway. When they began to wear medals, the cause languished. It was a greater day for the church when Christians were fed to the lions than when they bought season tickets and sat in the grandstand.⁵

What will it take to bring people to this level of commitment? It will require bold, passionate, and thorough preaching of the Gospel of Christ. When will it come to pass? One woman's answer is a classic: "when the church stops trying to entertain the goats and gets back to feeding the sheep."

3. *The principle of purity:* Purity is another principle that receives tremendous emphasis throughout the New Testament. As one man said, "Christianity is not the world made just a little better." In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told us that only the pure in heart shall see God (Matt. 5:8). In Titus 2, we find that God's grace is not to be interpreted as a license to sin, as so many seem to believe. Instead, grace teaches that there is an appropriate and proper way to live:

For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ; who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works (Tit. 2:11-14).

Christians are commanded to present their bodies as a living sacrifice that is "holy, acceptable unto God" (Rom. 12:1). We are not to yield any part of our bodies as instruments of sin (6:13). We have been bought with a price and are given the challenge to glorify God in our bodies (1 Cor. 6:20). We are admonished to examine everything carefully and hold fast to only that which is good (1 Thess. 5:21).

I am convinced that one of the greatest reasons for our lack of evangelistic success is that the world does not see a significant difference in the life of some Christians when compared to those in the world. Notice the strategy for effective evangelism outlined in 1 Peter 2:9-10: "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the

praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” The first part of this verse outlines the uniqueness of the Christian life and the church. This is the attraction phase of the Great Commission, for there will be some non-Christians who are looking for a better way to live. Then there is the proclamation phase where the credit for the differences between the child of God and the world is given to the Savior. The One Who called us through His Word and redeemed us is praised. Our life and lips proclaim the message, “Come and see” (John 1:39,46). Again, successful evangelism begins with purity of life on the part of those who claim to be New Testament Christians. Martin Lloyd-Jones expresses the thought well when he writes:

Our Lord attracted sinners because He was different. They drew near to Him because they felt that there was something different about Him...And the world always expects us to be different. This idea that you are going to win people to the Christian faith by showing them that after all you are remarkably like them, is theologically and psychologically a profound blunder.⁶

In my thirty years of being a Christian, I have observed a number of different methods of presenting the Gospel to the lost. The brotherhood continues to look for the perfect method. I heard someone say in a sermon years ago that which should be echoed again and again throughout the brotherhood: “while the church continues to look for better methods, the Lord continues to look for better men.”

But what happens when individual Christians fail to take the call to purity seriously? Not only is that person's reputation affected, but the reputation of the congregation

where he attends is also affected. One can easily determine how God considers the matter of sin in the camp when the New Testament is carefully studied, especially the book of Acts. Specific incidents are recorded that show God's disdain for sin. Acts 5, for example, records the incident where Ananias and Sapphira lied to the church. They were both struck dead to serve as an eternal reminder that God holds us responsible for our actions. A few chapters later, we read of Simon, a sorcerer who became a Christian in Samaria as a result of Philip's preaching. His sin was recorded along with the appropriate actions of the church because he had sinned. He was told, "Thy heart is not right with God" (Acts 8:21). He was encouraged to repent because it does make a difference as to how one lives in the church. Church discipline was taught and enforced for the sake of church purity.

The New Testament is crystal clear about what must be done when repentance does not occur. Withdrawal of fellowship is commanded against false teachers (Rom. 16:17). Also, the church is to not allowed to keep company with someone who is a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolator, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner (1 Cor. 5:11). Those who sin personally against other Christians and do not repent are to be disciplined as well (Matt. 18:15-17), along with those who walk disorderly (2 Thess. 3:6). Most congregations have ignored these commands. Why? Do they not believe that God knows best how to direct the affairs of the church? He does. Man does not (Jer. 10:23). Many consider the practice of church discipline unloving, but it is out of love for lost souls and the purity of the church that such drastic action must be taken.

If we are going to be the Lord's people, then we cannot pick and choose the commands we want to follow and ignore the rest. Every command has been placed in the

Bible by an all-knowing God to be obeyed. We cannot preach the importance of obedience to denominations and to the lost and dying world and then ignore the command to withdraw fellowship from those who refuse to repent. One major reason why the New Testament church is not growing today as it should is because of the failure to abide by the principle of purity.

4. *The principle of peace:* No congregation can be successful in church growth without peace and unity. The church at Jerusalem in its early days was growing by leaps and bounds. One key factor contributing to their amazing growth is mentioned in Acts 4:32: "And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul." When people are united in doctrine, attitude, and work, great things will be accomplished for the Master. Without it, church growth and individual growth will be slowed, or even stopped altogether.

John 17:20-23 records Jesus' prayer for unity among His disciples. The reason for desiring such unity is mentioned twice in the passage: "that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." The unbelieving world will never be convinced of the merits of New Testament Christianity when it observes strife and discord among brethren. Resolving conflict in the church must always be one of its greatest priorities. Consider the church at Corinth with all of its problems, addressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians. I do not believe that it was accidental that the first problem addressed by Paul was the problem of discord. Paul wrote:

Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it hath

been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you (1 Cor 1:10-11).

This passage has been quoted often to show, and rightfully so, the evils of denominationalism. But this passage is to be applied as well in every congregation of the Lord's body. Much has been recorded in the New Testament by way of instruction for the Christian on the importance of unity, along with the attitudes and qualities that must be developed to keep and maintain unity. Instruction is also given on actions to be taken by those who refuse to "follow after things which make for peace" (Rom. 14:19; 16:17).

Ephesians 4:4-7 is a favorite text among Gospel preachers and teachers on unity. However, little emphasis is given to the essential virtues that identify the worthy Christian life (mentioned in Ephesians 4:1-3) that will lay the foundation for unity:

I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

John MacArthur makes the following excellent point about these virtues and the unity resulting from their practice:

...they are probably the most powerful testimony the church can have, because they are in such contrast to the attitudes and the disunity of the world. No program or method, no matter how carefully planned and executed, can open the

door to the gospel in the way individual believers can do when they are genuinely humble, meek, patient, forbearing in love.⁷

The New Testament is full of instruction on how to develop Christ-like relationships among brethren and also in all other possible human relationships. 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 would be a great place to start in those congregations where peace and unity are lacking. In this passage, the apostle Paul defines true Christian love, providing approximately fifteen identifying characteristics. Our brethren, by and large, do not know them or practice them with regularity. Fellowship is hindered because of it. The threat of withdrawal of fellowship then carries little or no weight. Purity is then sacrificed at the altar of selfishness.

I have never known of a congregation of the Lord's church that was successful in evangelism that was not also successful in meeting the individual needs of its members. The church in Jerusalem is provided as a model of how Christians can meet the needs of other Christians (Acts 4:32-37). The New Testament demands it as well, for Paul wrote: "but in lowliness of mind let each esteem another better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others" (Phil. 2:3-4). When the church has grown to the point in their love and maturity where they can and will live with other Christians in peace, when they will strive diligently to look after the things of others, they will be poised for church growth through evangelism. Any congregation that has little desire to be with or care for its own will not evangelize the lost. The principle of peace must be practiced in the congregation first.

Conclusion

Church growth does not occur by accident. It is a result of understanding and practicing key Biblical principles of

growth. Four principles are provided as a starting place for your study. Others that are important will be learned along the way as these four are implemented. The process begins with understanding the great purpose for which we have been called out of the world.

Church leaders must have a clear vision of where their congregation stands relative to its purpose as defined in the New Testament. Plans will need to be made, bathed in prayer, that will set every member on the road to maturity and usefulness. Great preaching and teaching will inspire, train, and equip the members to follow God's plan. This is certainly not the time for weak men and weak messages. Purity and perfection must be the constant goal of each member, not other Christians or congregations that fall far short of the mark. Peace must be pursued with a passion, knowing the good that will come to the individual, to the congregation, and to the Lord (Eph. 3:20-21).

We close with a short article that expresses the mindset the church sorely needs today. May it inspire you as it has me and provide an example of how we must challenge those who make up the Lord's church. I do not know the author, but may his tribe increase. It is entitled, "I Am A Disciple."

I'm a part of the fellowship of the unashamed. The die is cast. I've stepped over the line. The decision has been made. I'm a disciple of His. I won't look back, slow down, let up, back away or be stilled. My past is redeemed, my present makes sense, my future is secure. I am finished and done with low living, sight walking, small planning, smooth knees, tame vision, mundane talking, chintzy giving, and dwarf goals.

I no longer need preeminence, position, prosperity, promotion, platitudes, or popularity. I do not have to be right, first, tops, recognized, praised, regarded, or

rewarded. I live by presence, lean by faith, walk by patience, live by prayer, and labor by power. My face is set, my gait is fast, my goal is Heaven, my road is narrow, my way is rough, my companions few, my guide is reliable, my mission is clear.

I cannot be bought, compromised, detoured, lured away, turned down, deluded, or delayed. I will not flinch in the face of sacrifice, hesitate in the presence of adversity, negotiate at the table of my enemies, ponder at the pool of popularity or meander in the maze of mediocrity. I won't give up, shut up, let up...until I've stayed up, stored up, prayed up, paid up, preached up the cause of Christ. I'm a disciple of Jesus!!!

I must go until He comes, give till I drop, preach to all I know, work till He stops me. And when He comes for His own, He'll have no problem recognizing me for my colors will be clear. I am a disciple.

Endnotes

1 Jack Williams, **Church Growth God's Way** (Independence, MO: Williams Publishing, 1985), p. 38.

2 Mac Lynn, **Churches of Christ in the United States** (Nashville: 21st Century Christian, 1997), p. 15.

3 Joe S. Ellis, **The Church on Purpose** (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, 1982), p. 60.

4 John MacArthur, **Ashamed of the Gospel** (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993), p. 29.

5 J. Oswald Sanders, **Spiritual Maturity** (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), p. 46.

6 MacArthur, **Ashamed of the Gospel**, p. xvii.

7 John MacArthur, **The MacArthur New Testament Commentary on Ephesians** (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute, 1986), p.129.

CHAPTER 24

The Organization Of The Lord's Church

Bobby Liddell

Commendation

THE *SOUTHAVEN CHURCH OF* Christ shines as a beacon of light, “holding forth the word of life,” in the midst of a dark, dreary, and lost world (Matt. 5:14-16; Phil. 2:14-16). An expression of gratitude is appropriate for the elders who oversee this work, the deacons who serve, the preachers who faithfully labor, and the other members whose Christian lives, coupled with God’s great blessings, make possible the work of this great church. It is both a pleasure and an honor to be associated with these good brethren in this lectureship. Only eternity will tell the good done by these efforts; thus, we are thankful for all who diligently strive to prepare and present this lecture program. Attending and/or obtaining the books and tapes will be of great benefit to all who would better understand God’s Word and who would better serve Him.

Introduction

God ordained that the church of our Lord be organized according to His pattern.¹ That should not be a surprise since He has always demanded that His pattern be followed—when such was given (Heb. 8:5). How then shall we know God’s will in the area of church organization?

The same way we know God's will in any other area—by a careful examination of His revealed Word (Acts 20:32). In this study, we shall consider God's plan for church organization, departures from that plan, reform, restoration, and the present and future state of church organization.

God's Pattern For Church Organization

God commanded that there be a plurality of qualified male Christians designated as elders (and by associated descriptive titles as shown below), duly selected and appointed, to oversee the work of each local congregation (Acts 14:23; Tit. 1:5; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:6ff; Heb. 13:17; Acts 20:28). Never, according to God's plan, was any church overseen by **an** elder or **the** elder (or a **she** elder). Nor was there ever an organization of churches into a district, diocese, convention, or synod, according to the Divine directive. There was no God-ordained organization which was larger than the local congregation but smaller than the church universal, as in modern day denominationalism. Each local congregation was independent of others and self-ruled under the authority of God.

Therefore, the authority came not from some individual over a congregation, or from some man or group of men over several churches, but each local church followed the Word of God. While such an arrangement made them neither isolationists nor anti-cooperationists, it did work to avoid the danger of one church's fall causing several others to fall with it. As the old illustration goes, if a window has only one pane, breaking it destroys the whole window; however, if a window has many individual panes, to break one does not (necessarily) affect the others which remain intact and unbroken.

Many have set forth that men have the responsibility, or the right, or the privilege of determining how the church should be organized. The plain truth is that men have

never been entrusted so. Nor can man ever improve upon God's plan for the government of the kingdom, though many have tried. The way to salvation, acceptable worship, and/or church organization is not in man (Jer. 10:23). Still, some men contend that church organization is a matter of indifference or of opinion. Some, in attempting to formulate a manmade organizational system, still argue congregational autonomy must be maintained, while others propose a denominational concept of conferences and conventions which exist to pass laws and to foster manmade mandates upon members. Others hold to the papal system of a universal leader, with the hierarchical pyramid under him. In addition, those leaning toward pragmatism are willing to accept whatever they think "works." While one tending toward anti-ism is ready to bind laws where God has not bound, the liberal is ready to loose where God has not loosed (Matt. 16:19; 18:18). At the same time, the worldly want something more than the simple plan offered by God, for it is not elaborate and impressive enough for them.

In order to consider the organization of the church, we shall study primarily the ones whom God's Word shows are to have the rule over the local congregation (Heb. 13:17). Generally, we, in churches of Christ, speak of these men as "elders." This is but one of six words used to name and describe those whom God has set over the local congregation. Notice the various uses as recorded in Acts 20. Paul sent for the "elders" of the church of Ephesus (v. 17), whom he calls "overseers" (v. 28), and whom he instructs to "shepherd" (feed) the church (v. 28). These are three words describing the same group of people. However, we mentioned six words. The fact is that each of these three words has a companion word. "Elders" (from *presbuteros*) may also be called "presbyters." "Overseers" (from *episkopos*) may also be termed "bishops." "Shepherds"

(from *poimano*) may also be called “pastors.” Consequently, since each word describes the same persons as the other five words do, an elder is a presbyter, is a bishop, is an overseer, is a shepherd, and is a pastor. Please note a preacher is not, just because he is a preacher, a pastor. The word “pastor” refers to one of the plurality of men qualified, selected, and appointed to oversee the work of the local church as shepherds, feeding the flock.

Forewarnings About Departure

God, through His inspired Word, warned about departures in general, including in the area of church leadership, before such departures ever took place (Matt. 24:10-12; Acts 20:28-31; 2 Thess. 2:1-5; 1 Tim. 4:1-3; Heb. 2:1): “We are on safe ground when we say that any change in doctrine or organization from that found in the New Testament is a departure.”² Therefore, recognizing that God’s warnings were given before the fact, none should be surprised that what God predicted came to pass.

While looking at the history of church organization is important, let us not forget the attitude which brought about the first step down the long road of departure that has brought so many to their doom. From the passages listed above, two characteristics of those who would lead men away from God stand out—deceit and pride. It seems the latter is the moving force behind the former. Men of pride want to be seen, to be known, and to be recognized as somebody. When that cannot be accomplished by following the Word of God, such men often are not averse to turning from the Truth to fashion a poisonous concoction of half-truth in order to advance themselves. In reality, they become enemies of the Truth, unwilling to submit themselves to the authority of Deity, yet perfectly willing to speak “perverse things, to draw away disciples after them” (Acts 20:30).

Such a man was the infamous, and condemned, Diotrephes, who loved to have the preeminence and actively opposed any who dared to challenge his ungodly position. Of him, John, inspired apostle of love, wrote:

I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church (3 John 9-10).

Sadly, many of his spiritual descendants still move among us.

The Apostolic Fathers On Early Church Organization

The uninspired writings of the men generally known as the Apostolic Fathers (because they lived near the time of the apostles or had known an apostle or apostles), shed light on the organization of the early church from A.D. 100-150. One of the early writings, thought to have been composed around the end of the first century, was sent from the church at Rome to the church at Corinth. Clement, one of the elders of the church at Rome, serving along with Cletus and Linus, is thought to have been the one who penned the letter. While many important facets of the letter might be discussed, let us focus on the point before us—the organization of the church.

This uninspired letter from Clement refers to the “bishops and deacons” of the church. One is reminded of Philippians 1:1: “Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at

Philippi, with the bishops and deacons.” Thus, at the close of the first century, as is evident from this letter, there was no difference made between elders and bishops. The bishops and deacons were shown to be the “officers” of the church, with a plurality of both in each local congregation, serving that congregation only. No scholar of repute, regardless of his religious affiliation, or lack of such, denies that in New Testament times the local church was, after the apostolic teaching, overseen by elders and served by deacons and that other systems of church government and organization came later.

Another uninspired writing of the same period, though some thirty to fifty years later, is the **Didache**, or **Teaching of the Twelve Apostles**. It also speaks of the bishops and deacons of the local church. Again, the evidence is that there were no other church offices and no office held by men above the local eldership. Though not written as a treatise on church organization, its notation of that organization, common in the church of the day and according to God’s revealed will, is an additional and valuable proof.

Polycarp’s letter, addressed to the church at Philippi (c. A.D. 115), is another important testimony to the fact that the church continued, at least for some time, without departing from the apostolic pattern. In it, he mentions the elders and deacons and counsels the church to submit to them. Likewise, Papias, writing about A.D. 140, referred to the presbyters of the local church as its leaders. So, too, did the **Shepherd of Hermas**, written around A.D. 150, mention the elders who have the charge of the church.

In all these uninspired writings of the so-called Apostolic Fathers, there is agreement concerning church organization. Each speaks of those who had the oversight of the local congregation in accord with the revealed Word given through the inspired writers of the New Testament.

None mentions a church ruled by a board of deacons without elders. None gives any hint of a system in which bishops were over elders. None refers to a distinction made between bishops and elders; therefore, we may conclude from the evidence that up to the year A.D. 150, there was no such distinction made by men, for they recognized there was no such distinction made by God.

The Apologists On Early Church Organization

Following the age of the Apostolic Fathers, the Apologists arose. These were men who set forth a defense, or apology, of their faith and practices. While these writings, as are the writings of the aforementioned group, are the writings of men, they have a distinct value in that they present a historical picture of the church in their day.

Among the Apologists was Irenaeus who unwittingly began a tradition to which others would appeal and upon which they would build. Near the close of the second century, in an effort to withstand those who attacked the Truth and promoted heresy, he wrote several books called **Against Heresies**. In them, he tried to trace a succession of bishops back to both Peter and Paul, who, according to Irenaeus (but not according to Scripture), founded the church in Rome. He hoped that by so doing, he could prove the Scriptures, to which he held, were truly the ones given by God through inspired men. Interestingly, Irenaeus did not mention Peter as the first bishop, or pope, of Rome or any of the other innovations affecting congregational autonomy, nor did he write of a hierarchy with its center in Rome. The simple reason for these omissions is that no such departures as these had yet taken place! However, the groundwork was being laid.

Following Irenaeus was Tertullian who also sought to defend the verity of the Scriptures. Like Irenaeus, to accomplish his purpose, he appealed to the tradition of the beginning of the Roman church in his work **On Prescription of Heretics**. He recognized the church at Rome as an example to others, yet he did not seek to place it above other churches. That would be the work of those who followed and who used the works of these men as leverage to push their positions.

Among those who acknowledged a distinction between bishops and elders was Hippolytus. Following a division in the Roman church, Hippolytus was selected as the bishop of one of the groups. He disputed the course taken by some in Rome and contested those selected as bishops of the other group. Still, he was against a church government centered in one man in Rome.

The Beginning Of Departure

The first step in departing from the New Testament pattern of church organization was the making of a distinction between bishops and elders. As noted above, this step was gradual in its taking place, as most departures are. Congregation by congregation, the idea of one-man rule over the local church was adopted. Some did so, thinking this was the way to prevent a departure from doctrine; entrusting the safekeeping of the congregation to one man thereby ensured unity and prevented departures into heresy. Such was the thinking of Ignatius of Antioch who had argued for one man, called the bishop, to be over the local church with the elders and deacons serving under him. Ignatius encouraged church members to look upon the bishop as they would upon Christ, and upon the elders as they would upon the apostles of Christ.

From the planting of this seed grew the system known as the monarchical episcopate, or one-man rule in oversight. Apparently, a seemingly innocent and appropriate practice may have led to the departure. It was not unusual for an eldership to select one of the elders to preside over the meetings of the eldership. Over time, the presiding elder took upon himself more and more authority, ultimately supplanting the authority of the eldership. He eventually became known as the "bishop" (though this usage is contrary to Scripture) to whom the eldership submitted and under whom they served.

As members and elders looked to the bishop for guidance, he gained more and more influence. He was the one who was expected to make decisions necessary to the continuance and well being of the congregation. In times of doubt or danger, he was the one to whom the brethren turned. As well, in the work of the church, his was the voice of authority. Because of his leading the church in evangelizing and in establishing other congregations, the newly established churches would look to him. Thus, step-by-step, the position of monarchical bishop was solidly entrenched, its influence broadened, and its acceptance nearly universal.

With the help of men such as Cyprian of Carthage, champion of the hierarchy, came the development of a priesthood of "clergy" apart from the "laity." Along with the development of the monarchical episcopate, the rise of the manmade priesthood hastened the downfall of the church. Making a distinction between members in the manmade clergy/laity system brought changes in the worship. No longer could a regular member take part in conducting the public worship. This development led to empty ceremonial ritual and elaborate display as replacements for simple worship according to the New Testament pattern. As the architects of this departure had

looked to the Old Testament system of the Levitical priesthood for their pattern, they also concluded that only “priests” could lead in worship and that only worship conducted by these “priests” was acceptable worship. They ignored the Bible’s teaching that all baptized believers in Christ are priests (1 Pet. 2:5,9; Rev. 1:6). In their manmade system, the high priest was the bishop, and the elders served as priests under him.

The Control Of Councils

Before His ascension, Christ had claimed all authority in heaven and earth (Matt. 28:18). As the head of the body, the church (Col. 1:18), He determined the rule by which His people walk (Gal. 6:16). It is His doctrine which has been delivered unto us and by which we are to be governed (2 John 9; Rom. 6:17; 1 Tim 1:3). It is Christ Whom we are to hear (Matt. 17:5; Heb. 1:1-3). In spite of clear instructions to the contrary (Matt. 15:9), religious leaders of the rapidly apostatizing church began to meet in councils to determine church doctrine and policy.

The first of these councils was called by Constantine the Great. Following more than two hundred and forty years of persecution at the hands of the emperors, Constantine acted as a friend of the church (of that day) and passed several laws intending to aid it. Realizing the benefits, to himself and to his empire, of befriending the church and of promoting unity within it, he called the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325 to settle a dispute concerning the nature of Christ. However, the question of the nature of Christ would not soon be settled as later councils were called to determine what the official position of the church would be.

Constantine paid the expenses of the three hundred and eighteen bishops who attended (though almost none of them came from the West—that is, Rome, and the bishop

of Rome did not attend), and, with gifts and allowances, he bought their favor. In return, they allowed him, though he had not been baptized and, consequently, was not even a member of the church (Acts 2:38,47), to chair the meeting and effectively determine the decisions it reached. In this way, the beginning of control by the head of state came about. Of the decisions made by the council, one in particular would lead to further departures, for the council formulated the office of metropolitan bishop, or Patriarch, and, by their decision, elevated the bishops of certain cities—Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch—to that status.

Other councils followed, including the Council of Chalcedon in 451. This council made a decision which the bishop of Rome zealously disputed, for it decided that the bishop of Constantinople was equal in power to the bishop of Rome. While the first several of these ecumenical councils were called by the emperor, the latter councils were either called by or greatly influenced by the one who sat as pope. In the decisions of the councils was an ever-growing tendency to exalt men and, ultimately, to exalt one man as the universal head of the church. Their decisions were, no doubt, influenced by the organization of the civil government that they so admired.

While some in the past, such as Cyprian of Carthage, had elevated the bishop of Rome, those in Constantinople claimed equality for the bishop who resided there. In this ongoing dispute, several factors served to Rome's advantage. The church in Rome was reputed to have been established by Paul and Peter (though we have no record of Peter's ever having been there), and Peter was said to have been the first bishop of Rome and the rock upon which the church was established (from a misapplication of Matthew 16:18). From him, the bishops and popes who came later claimed succession as the vicars of Christ. Likewise, Rome was recognized as the capital of the world,

and the church there had been known in the past for its many good works and evangelistic zeal. From this background, Leo the Great (serving as bishop of Rome from A.D. 440-460) made his assertion of supremacy over the bishop of the East and became the one recognized by many as the first pope.

The Rise Of The Roman Catholic System Of Church Organization

Departing from the New Testament pattern in one point usually leads to departure in many points. As men gave themselves more authority, which God had never given, they slowly developed a more sophisticated system of organization with more and more layers of authority. The Roman Catholic system claimed Christ had given to men on earth the power to act on His behalf and in His place. With the development of the Roman Catholic priesthood came the idea that the priest taught with the authority of Christ; stood in His place between man and God; formulated laws (both spiritual and civil) by which God's people were to be governed; and, without recognition of the power of the priesthood and submission to it, none could be saved or worship acceptably. None could be baptized, "confirmed," partake of the Lord's Supper (termed by them the Holy Eucharist), or be married unless the priest performed the act or conducted the ceremony.

The function of the priest was circumscribed by his position on the hierarchical ladder, and by what were termed "Powers of Orders" and "Powers of Jurisdiction." Powers of Orders regulated one's rise, through a series of steps, to the position of priest. Powers of Jurisdiction referred to the geographical domain of the priest's authority. In ascending order, from parish priest to pope, each position was given its specific duties and privileges. In Powers of Jurisdiction, each position upward involved

oversight of those lower in rank, effectively producing a structure of checking—but, more importantly, controlling—every priest, rural dean, vicar general, bishop, archbishop, and papal legate, with ultimate responsibility resting in the one called pope.

The Power of The Pope

The power of the pope over secular affairs was increased by emperors who were eager to work with the leaders of the church for the benefit of themselves. By granting to the church and to its leaders land, gifts, and even broader control, the emperors thought they would secure their own control over the church. Such favors brought the emperors the ability to bestow certain offices of the church upon whomsoever they willed and bolstered their claims of being head over the church. Eventually, the pope came to be second only to the emperor in secular authority, and as far as the emperor was concerned (in most cases), second in spiritual authority. As the pope's and the church's wealth and position grew, so grew the question and controversy concerning the headship of the church. Actually, God settled that question long ago, for that position belongs to Christ alone (Eph. 1:22-23).

Some popes were willing to play second fiddle to the emperor, but certain men achieved the office who were intent upon reversing the order. Nicholas I, who became pope in A.D. 858, argued he was head over the church and over the empire in matters pertaining to religion. Following the split of 1054, the Eastern Orthodox or Holy Orthodox church, headquartered in Constantinople, emerged as a separate body. During this time, Hildebrand, later to become Pope Gregory VII, was working behind the scenes to centralize authority in the papacy. Realizing the emperor and his subordinates gained control over church offices by giving the offices to whomsoever they would, one of the first things he did as pope was to call the Lateran Council of 1075, which

decided only the pope had the authority to appoint priests and bishops.

The controversy would not be settled by a decree of the council. Innocent III, pope from 1198-1216, not only believed he was the head of the church, but also that the kings of the earth received their positions at his bidding. Through the use of the interdict against those rulers who opposed him, he gained control to the point he was instrumental in determining the selection of the emperor. Other strong popes, such as Boniface VIII, solidified the pope's control over the secular by demanding that every person on earth, in order to be saved, must submit to the pope.

The Call For Reform

Though the church which claimed to be the church of the New Testament had been changed to something which was unrecognizable as that, there were those who still sought to do the Lord's will. No doubt, the great majority of believers had been swept into the political machinery of the papacy, but some insisted on a return to the Bible. So, in view of the many abuses, immorality, and ungodliness of the priests and of those who occupied the position of pope, some men began to call for a reform—and some paid with their lives for daring to sound such a call.

The Renaissance marked the transition from the medieval to the modern world. With it came a rebirth in learning, art, and culture, and a new way of viewing the individual. Coupled with a decline in the strength and influence of the papal system and a call for accountability of the church's leaders, the Renaissance helped lay the groundwork for the changes of the Reformation.

The purpose of this chapter is not to discuss the Reformation; however, it is important to note that the

failures of the Reformation to accomplish a return to New Testament Christianity prompted men to sound the call to go beyond just seeking to reform the apostate church and to go back to the Bible. The Protestant denominational churches which arose from the Reformation were free of some of the problems of the Roman Catholic church, but, in not going all the way back to the Bible way, failed to be the church for which Christ died (Acts 20:28; Eph. 5:25). In reality, they added to the confusion, and ushered in forms of church organization which were as foreign to God's plan as was the wicked system of the Catholic priesthood.

The Restoration Of New Testament Christianity

Trying to find the way through the fog of the Reformation was difficult for men who were seeking to restore the church. In throwing off the trappings of Catholicism, some were satisfied with minor improvement and sought no more. Others, in seeking, often looked in the wrong places. Some, like James O'Kelly and Rice Haggard, meeting in Virginia in 1794, called men back to what they called cardinal principles of the church, one of which was that Christ is the only head of the church, and another was that the Bible is the only rule of faith.

The impressive "Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery" (1804) declared the intent of its writers to cease "making laws for the government of the church." They also called for the church to be self-governing according to the simple Gospel. Through the work of many who sought only to do the will of God and to be Christians only, the church was restored. Included in that restoration was the restoration of the God-ordained system of church organization: Christ as head

of the church; each local congregation under the oversight of godly elders qualified according to the Scriptures, selected and appointed by the congregation; deacons likewise qualified, selected, and appointed, serving under the direction of the elders (1 Tim. 3:8ff); and all members of the one body (1 Cor. 12:20; cf. Phil. 1:1).

Church Organization In The Present Day

Truly, those who wish to be pleasing to God will obey Him (Luke 6:46). They will do so based upon understanding His will (Eph. 5:17). His plan for church organization is presented plainly, clearly, and understandably (1 Tim. 3; Tit. 1; Phil. 1:1; Acts 14:23; et al.). God's will is that all churches be scripturally organized (Tit. 1:5; Acts 14:23). None can be pleasing to God who would desire otherwise.

Sadly, some men cannot leave God's plan alone and, for whatever motives, seek to introduce plans of their own. Through the ensuing years following the restoration, men in the eldership have relinquished the oversight of the local congregation to embrace various substitutions. The false doctrines of majority rule (congregational democracy giving each member, and sometimes even nonmembers, a vote), evangelistic oversight (where the preacher becomes like the denominational pastor), or one-man rule (like a modern day Diotrephes) please some, but not God. The foolish claims of men to be modern day apostles, with the power to unseat elderships, are so far out as to be almost unbelievable, yet such has happened within churches claiming to be churches of Christ.

The idea that the elders are to lead as examples only—that is, the eldership has no rule or oversight—is another departure (cf. Heb. 13:17; Acts 20:28). Another alarming departure, the inclusion of women in elderships, has been proposed, and is reported to have taken place in some isolated instances. One can only wonder how a

woman can be the “husband of one wife” (Tit. 1:6). More departures will take place, as surely as the world continues to stand, but faithful children of God can still serve Him according to His plan—and will do so.

Conclusion—Church Organization In The Future

God’s plan for church leadership is right and cannot be wrong. Furthermore, God’s plan will work. Men do not need to try to improve upon it, for they cannot; nor to change it, for they dare not. What men need to do, now and in the future, is to demand that each local congregation be scripturally organized, and settle for absolutely nothing less.

How can we be sure the organization of the church is as God would have it to be? Go back to the Bible. Find therein the New Testament pattern for the New Testament church. Follow it. That is so simple, but many still cannot see it, or perhaps they do not want to see it, for it does not promote the ambitious, self-serving desires of the proud, ignorant lovers of preeminence. However, for God’s children, there can be no other way than God’s way.

What does the future hold? More departures? More problems? We cannot determine what others will do, but we can determine our courses. Let us, as did Joshua, make plain and sure our intended path, and with him declare: “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Josh. 24:15). May all Christians realize the best preparation for the future is to study and put into practice God’s Word—today.

Endnotes

1 See the author’s work, “History of Departure in Leadership,” **Leadership**, ed. Michael Hatcher (Pensacola, FL:

Bellview Church of Christ, 1997), pp. 397-409, where much of this material was originally published.

2 F. W. Mattox, **The Eternal Kingdom**, revised with additional chapters by John McRay (Delight, AR: Gospel Light Publishing Company, 1961), pp. 107-108. Having studied this book for more than twenty years, and having used it in local work in teaching classes and for several years as a textbook in teaching Church History at the Memphis School of Preaching, I am indebted to the work of its author and reviser, give credit to them for the background of the majority of the material in this chapter, and commend the reader to obtain and to study carefully this excellent work.

CHAPTER 25

The Worship Of The Lord's Church As God Would Have It

Michael Hatcher

Introduction

WHEN GOD CREATED MAN (Gen. 1), He placed within man certain needs. We immediately recognize the need for air, water, and food. There are other needs that are often overlooked: love, community, purpose or direction in life, creativity (putting something back into the world), etc. Among those needs is the need to worship. God created man with a worshiping nature. As such, we observe man worshiping God from the very beginning. We also notice that some worship was pleasing to God, and some was not respected by Him.

Cain and Abel offered sacrifices unto God (offering worship to Him). God had respect to Abel's offering but not Cain's (Gen. 4:1-5). As God revealed to the Israelites His Law, He revealed how to worship Him properly. God also reveals that if they worship idols or graven images their worship would be sin. Jesus said, "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve" (Matt. 4:10). Therefore, we **must** learn what worship pleases God so we may be accepted and not rejected of Him.

Types Of Worship

The Jews of Jesus' day were transgressing God's commands by substituting their traditions for the Word of God. Jesus informed them: "But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (Matt. 15:9). By teaching man's will instead of God's Word, their worship was valueless, worthless, and fruitless. Here is a worship which had no value with God.

When Paul was in Athens, he saw the city completely given over to idolatry. They had built altars to every god they could imagine. Fearful they might have left one out (and thus to appease him), they built one to the unknown god. As Paul saw this, he declared, "For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you" (Acts 17:23). They were worshipping, but they were not worshipping the only true God. They needed to be instructed concerning Him, which Paul undertook to do. This ignorant worship was not, and is not, acceptable to God.

Paul mentions another type of worship in writing to the Colossian brethren: "Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh" (Col. 2:23). This is worship which one chooses to do for himself. It is a worship which one devises and prescribes for himself, worshipping in a way which pleases self and not God. This worship is generally contrary to that revealed within the pages of God's revealed Word, and is, thus, not acceptable to Him.

While the preceding types of worship are rejected by God, Jesus discusses the type of worship which is pleasing and acceptable to Him. The Samaritan woman perceived that Jesus was a prophet, so she asked Him about the place of worship:

Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father. Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews. But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth (John 4:21-24).

Jesus establishes three great truths concerning acceptable worship today. He also indicates that there would be a change in our worship; Jesus knew that He was ushering in a New Covenant and we would no longer be under the Old.

True Worship

Our worship, to be valid in God's sight, **must** meet three requirements. Our worship **must be directed to the Father**. As God spoke to the Israelites, He began the Ten Commandments by saying:

Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me (Exod. 20:3-5).

God was teaching them that He was the proper object of worship. As Jesus was tempted by Satan, Satan tried to

get Him to “fall down and worship me” (Matt. 4:9): “Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve” (4:10). Anytime anyone changes the object of our worship, he commits sin and makes that worship an abomination.

Second, our worship **must be in spirit**. We must possess the proper attitude in our worship to God. Often the prophets of old condemned the Israelites because they went through the proper motions of worship but they did not have their heart involved in it. They had the externals of God’s religion but not the internal. So, today, we must possess the proper internal attitude of the heart for our worship to be pleasing to God. It is the view of this author that we have a great deal of difficulty in this respect today. We come to services to worship God but allow mundane things to creep into our minds choking out spiritual matters. We, thus, sing songs without ever thinking about what we are saying. We pray, often using the same expressions without giving it any thought, so it is no longer from our heart. Many never hear the sermon because they are talking, taking a nap, passing notes, making faces at the baby that is close by, etc. When we partake of the Supper of our Lord, we fail to remember the sacrifice He made and allow our minds to wander from the memorial service. We like the Jews of old are going through the externals of our religious service but without the proper spirit.

Third, our worship **must be in truth**. Jesus, in His high priestly prayer recorded by John, prayed: “Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth” (John 17:17). Thus, when Jesus speaks of our worship being in truth, He has reference to it being according to the Word of God—the Bible. God has authorized certain acts by which we can worship Him today. Realizing, as mentioned previously,

we are under the New Testament, those actions God commanded under the Old are no longer authorized. Today, we must look to the New Testament for our authorization. God has authorized for our worship today: singing, prayer, the contribution, Lord's Supper, and the preaching. To deviate from that which God has prescribed (as did the Jews in Matt. 15) makes our worship vain. This writer wants to spend the remaining portion of this chapter dealing with that which God has authorized in our worship to Him.

Singing

In the New Testament there are some references to actions either prior to or after the worship of the church of our Lord in the Christian age regarding music (i.e., Matt. 26:30; Mark 14:26; Rev. 5:8; 14:2; 15:2). While these might be interesting to study, they have nothing to do with the worship of the Lord's church today. We must discover what God has authorized for our worship today, not in the past or in the future. Let us first list all the passages (in the order they are found) dealing with the music of the New Testament church or Christians:

And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them (Acts 16:25).

And that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy; as it is written, For this cause I will confess to thee among the Gentiles, and sing unto thy name (Rom. 15:9).

What is it then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also (1 Cor. 14:15).

Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord (Eph. 5:19).

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord (Col 3:16).

Saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee (Heb. 2:12).

Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms (Jas. 5:13).

We might also add:

By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name. But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased (Heb. 13:15-16).

While this is not a specific reference to the music in our worship to God, singing would be included.

We must also consider the nature of music and its subcategories. Music is a category which includes many subcategories. Please consider the chart (located at the end of this chapter) as explanation, and comments are made concerning it. All music is either vocal or it is not vocal; there can be no other kinds of music. In the area of vocal music, we can divide all vocal music into communicable or noncommunicable. In other words, it either communicates a message or it does not. Also, that which communicates a message can be divided into

communicating in a foreign language, or in one's mother tongue. The noncommunicable area of vocal music is the making of sounds with our voice but those sounds do not communicate any message. Examples of this kind of music are humming, whistling, making our voice simulate instruments of music, long sustained "Ah's," or "Oh's," etc. When we move to the subcategory of nonvocal music, it likewise can be divided into two categories. There is mechanical, nonvocal (instrumental) music or nonmechanical, nonvocal (instrumental) music. The mechanical, nonvocal music is divided into several groups: brass (trumpets, trombones, tubas, etc.), woodwinds (clarinets, oboes, flutes, etc.), percussion (bass drum, snare drums, castanets, etc.), strings (violin, viola, bass, etc.), and electronic synthesizers. The last subgroup is the nonmechanical, nonvocal (instrumental) music. This music is human-produced instrumental music such as snapping fingers, stomping feet, clapping hands, etc.

In the passages considered above, God never instructed man simply to make music. If he had, everything within this chart would be authorized for man to do in worship to God. Additionally, God did not simply state to make vocal music. If he had generically authorized vocal music, then every subcategory under vocal music would be authorized. However, God always (per the passages listed previously) specified singing. Singing is a specific kind of vocal music. In the chart, singing is communicable vocal music. Everything under this category (foreign language or mother tongue) is also authorized in worship to God. However, no other category has been authorized. Therefore, we must conclude that instrumental music, whether mechanical or human (non-mechanical), is without authorization and thus sinful. We must also conclude that noncommunicable, vocal music is also not authorized and therefore sinful. This corresponds to the

instructions that we are to teach and admonish one another in our singing (Col. 3:16). Only communicable, vocal music is able to teach and admonish.

Since we are to teach and admonish, our singing must be according to the Truth. We must make sure that the songs we sing are teaching God's doctrine and not false doctrine. There are many songs in our books that simply are not scriptural, and, thus, we should not sing them. There are other songs in which we should eliminate certain stanzas because that specific stanza teaches error. There are other songs in which all we need to do is to change certain words to bring them in harmony with God's Word.

Let us also notice a few principles from the previously mentioned passages. The types of songs we are to sing in worship to God are psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Other types of songs are not authorized by God in worship to Him. We are not to sing patriotic songs or country and western songs or other like songs in our worship. We learn that singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs is worship and may be done either in the public assemblies (cf. 1 Cor. 14:15) or in private (cf. Acts 16:25; Jas. 5:13). In either one we must still act by the authority of Christ (Col. 3:17).

Another lesson we learn is that we are all to engage in the singing. Both Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 use a specific term (*heautou*) which is a reflexive pronoun. What this means is that we are doing this to each other and doing it simultaneously; I am teaching and admonishing you in song as/while you are teaching and admonishing me in song. Having choruses and choirs sing while others are listening in our worship has no scriptural authority.

Prayer

Prayer is one of the great privileges of the Christian. Only those who are Christians have the right to call upon the God of heaven as their Father. Every teaching in the

Bible (Old and New Testament) is applied to the child of God, and no passage applies the privilege or blessing of prayer to anyone other than a child of God:

The Lord is far from the wicked: but he heareth the prayer of the righteous (Prov. 15:29).

He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination (28:9).

Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear (Isa. 59:1-2).

Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much (Jas. 5:16).

For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and his ears are open unto their prayers: but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil (1 Pet. 3:12).

The man who is righteous is the man who does or obeys God's commands or the Gospel of Christ (1 John 3:7; Psm. 119:172; Rom. 1:16-17). While there are many other passages and evidence dealing with this, these are sufficient to show that God will only hear the prayer of one who is a faithful Christian.

Christians have the **need** of prayer. The fact that Christ prayed evidences the fact that Christians should be characterized by prayer. As one looks at Jesus' life, we observe Him in prayer before any major event of His life.

If He, being God in the flesh (Matt. 1:23; 1 Tim. 3:16), realized the need of prayer within His life, how much more should we recognize that need? Thus, we are encouraged to pray:

Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation;
continuing instant in prayer (Rom. 12:12).

Praying always with all prayer and supplication
in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all
perseverance and supplication for all saints
(Eph. 6:18).

Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by
prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let
your requests be made known unto God (Phil.
4:6).

Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with
thanksgiving (Col. 4:2).

Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks:
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus
concerning you (1 Thess. 5:17-18).

Certainly, Christians should be known for being a praying people.

Let us notice some of the conditions or **requirements** for acceptable prayer. The first is that the person must be a faithful child of God, as seen in the preceding section. The prayer must be offered in faith (Matt. 21:22; Jas. 1:6-7). We must believe what God says about prayer and believe that He will give us what we request. Prayers must be offered with sincerity of heart (1 Cor. 14:15; Matt. 6:5). Closely associated with this is fervency (Jas. 5:15-18; Col. 4:12; where “laboring fervently”

is literally agonizing, showing all of your being embraced in the prayer). We are to be persistent in our prayer life (Luke 11:5-8; 18:1-8).

We must pray with a forgiving spirit (Matt. 6:12,14-15; 18:23-35; Mark 11:25-26). However, we do not have the right to forgive someone who is not repentant. Forgiveness is always based upon repentance (Luke 17:3-4; Col. 3:12-13; Christ forgives on the basis of repentance, and we follow the pattern He set).

Prayers must be with understanding, according to 1 Corinthians 14:15. The context of this statement shows that this is giving understanding to others, as Paul is speaking of public prayers. The one leading in public prayer should do so in such a way that other worshipers can hear and understand. They will then be able to say "Amen" (meaning: "let it be so," or "so be it") at the giving of the prayer. While we should be as charitable as possible regarding public prayers, there are some phrases which brethren have picked up over the years that are not scriptural. We should be careful as to what we say. This means that we should be thoughtful about our prayer life. We are not to say meaningless phrases and words (Matt. 6:7-8) but give deep thought to what we say.

Men must have the right motive when they pray. James writes: "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts" (Jas. 4:3). James reveals that the reason they were not receiving from God when they asked is that they were asking with the wrong motive. Literally "lusts" is "pleasures," as in the ASV. They were asking amiss. This brings up the question, "For what can we pray?" While not giving a complete answer, notice some things: for daily sustenance or necessities of life (Matt. 6:11); for physical infirmities or sicknesses (2 Cor. 12:7-9; Jas. 5:14); for wisdom (Jas. 1:5); for our enemies (Matt. 5:44); for rulers (1 Tim. 2:1-2); for

peace, so we can more effectively spread the Gospel (2:2-4— not peace for peace’s sake); for preachers (Luke 10:2; Eph. 6:18-20); for help to overcome temptation (Mat. 6:13; 1 Cor. 10:13); and for the forgiveness of our sins (1 John 1:9; Matt. 6:12). We have the right to pray for anything we want:

Therefore I say unto you, What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them (Mark 11:24).

And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us: And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him (1 John 5:14-15).

Since we can ask for “any thing,” what would be asking amiss? The wrong motive is asking for something for our own pleasures. We can pray for anything and everything if the motive or purpose behind it is to better do the will of God.

Prayers are to be directed to the Father through (or in the name of) Christ. In the model prayer, Jesus instructed us to pray: “Our Father which art in heaven” (Matt. 6:9). He told His apostles:

And in that day ye shall ask me nothing. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in my name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full...At that day ye shall ask in my name: and I say not unto you, that I will pray the Father for you (John 16:23-24,26).

Jesus specifically states that prayer is not to be directed to Him but to the Father in His name. What Jesus told His apostles is repeated for all saints: “Giving thanks

always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph. 5:20). Songs encouraging us to have "Just A Little Talk With Jesus" or to "Tell It To Jesus Alone" (or other like songs) should not be sung. Likewise, we are not to pray to an apostle, Mary, a departed loved one, or anyone other than the Father. Prayers must be in the name of Christ. This is not a statement (as many suppose) but an action, something we do. It is praying by the authority of Christ, which means that we pray as He has authorized (cf. Col. 3:17; Acts 4:7).

Prayer must be according to God's will. Jesus, speaking to the apostles, says, "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you" (John 15:7). John applies this to every child of God: "And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us" (1 John 5:14). For prayer to be effective, we must bring our will into harmony with the Father's will (Matt. 6:10). To pray according to God's will means we must **know** God's will and then do everything possible to accomplish His will. God will act providentially in bringing about our request, but God often uses humans to accomplish His will. Paul prayed for the salvation of the Jews (Rom. 10:1-3), but he did all he could to save them.

Contribution

The Bible has a great deal to say about man and his money. In those instructions, the Christian is instructed to give of his money to the work of the church. Paul writes:

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given order to the churches of Galatia, even so do ye. Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come (1 Cor. 16:1-2).

Several times in the Corinthian letter, Paul, by inspiration, says that what he wrote to Corinth was also for all churches everywhere (1 Cor. 1:2; 4:17; 7:17). Thus, when he gives orders to the churches of Galatia, and now to Corinth, Paul is setting forth God's commands for all churches, including our own.

Paul informs us of the day the church is to take up a collection. That day is the first day of the week. This is the day our Lord rose from the dead (Mark 16:9) and the day the church was established (Acts 2). It is the day that is referred to as the Lord's day (Rev. 1:10), and is the day the church regularly assembled to engage in worship to Him (Acts 20:7). It comes every week, and it is Sunday.

What is commanded is for every person to put money into the common public treasury of the church. He tells us we are to give in accordance with the blessings we have received of God. As one studies 2 Corinthians 8-9 we learn that we are to give of a willing mind, liberally, bountifully, cheerfully, sacrificially, purposefully, not sparingly, and not grudgingly. Remembering that all things belong to God and we have only been entrusted with its care will help us to give in this way. Also, remembering what God has given for us (His only begotten Son—John 3:16) will help us to give properly. When we give as God has instructed, we are laying up treasure for ourselves in heaven (Matt. 6:19-21; Phil. 4:17-18):

If you are contributing of your means for the support of the church, be liberal; don't insult God by giving what you would be ashamed for your closest friends to see you give. Purpose to give liberally, and promise to do so, so you will have a double incentive to be liberal. Believe that every dime you give will be laid up to your account in heaven (Matt. 6:19-21; Phil. 4:14-18.). Then trust God to take care of you, and don't be afraid that he will go back on his promises.¹

Paul uses the Macedonian brethren as an illustration for giving (2 Cor. 8:1-5). They gave even though they were in deep poverty themselves, but they were rich in their liberality. They were so liberal that they went "beyond their power" in their giving. They viewed their giving as a opportunity, not an imposition, and thus they intreated Paul to accept their gift. The reason they had such Christian liberality is because they "first gave their own selves to the Lord." When we give ourselves to God then our treasure will follow: "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matt. 6:19).

The purpose of placing this money into the common treasury is to meet the needs that arise. The church has certain needs which arise (supporting the preaching of the Gospel, helping needy people, money associated with our worshiping God, etc.), and money is to be placed into this treasury to prepare for and have the money to meet those needs. While Paul was dealing with a specific need (a collection for the saints who were in poverty at Jerusalem), there are still needs that must be met today and the church is to have the treasury to meet those needs.

The summation of this is that the church is only to receive its financial support from freewill offerings. The church is not to go into business to gain its money, and it is not to have cake or pie sales, garage sales, or other types of moneymaking schemes to gain its support.

Lord's Supper

Just prior to our Lord's crucifixion, He instituted a Supper for those in His kingdom. The Synoptic accounts of the Gospel record the institution of this Communion service (Matt. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:19-20). First, He took the bread (it was unleavened bread because it was at the Passover when the Israelites could not have any leaven in the house), blessed it (which means he gave

thanks for it), brake it, gave it to the apostles, and told them: “Take, eat; this is my body” (Matt. 26:26). Next, He took the cup (metonymy for the contents of the cup, which is the fruit of the vine), blessed it, and gave it to them to drink, saying, “Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (26:27-28). When Jesus said, “this is my body...my blood,” He did not mean that the elements (unleavened bread and fruit of the vine) had changed into His actual body and blood. It was still unleavened bread and grape juice, and those elements only **represented** His body and blood. To use different elements would be vain worship because it would not have the authority of Christ, only of man.

The Scriptures use different terms to designate this Supper. Paul refers to it as the “Lord’s Supper” (1 Cor. 11:20). Earlier, in this same book, he referred to it as a “communion” (10:16) and as the “Lord’s table” (10:21); also, in these two verses, it is referred to as the “cup of blessing” and the “cup of the Lord.” The inspired historian, Luke, records the early church continuing in the “breaking of bread” (Acts 2:42) and coming together to “break bread” (20:7).

However, today, some use terms which the Bible never uses regarding the Supper (we are to speak as the oracles of God, not the doctrines of man—1 Pet. 4:11). Many call this memorial supper the “Eucharist,” (which means “thankfulness, gratitude, to show favor to”) coming from the presiding bishop of the apostate church consecrating the elements.

Another non-Bible term some have come up with is “Sacrament,” and many times they will add holy to it (“Holy Sacrament”). This comes from a Latin term meaning “oath, solemn obligation.” Apostate groups use this term to mean “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual

grace.” There simply is no such thing—it is purely the imagination of apostate groups who refuse to stay within the bounds of God’s Word. These terms should not be used for the Supper of our Lord.

Concerning the Supper, Jesus said, “This do in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19). Thus, the Lord’s Supper is a memorial done to remember the body and blood of Jesus (the Scriptures never speak of it as a memorial to His burial and resurrection, only His death). During this Supper we have communion (participation, fellowship, or sharing) with the Father and Christ (1 Cor. 10:16) and with one another (10:17). In partaking of it we proclaim the Lord’s death (that He died for our sins—Matt. 26:28) and our faith in His second coming (1 Cor. 11:26). We are also proclaiming the covenant He made by His shed blood (Matt. 26:28; 1 Cor. 11:25).

Paul makes it clear that we are to partake of the communion in the proper manner. We must take of it in a worthy manner as we examine ourselves. When we do this properly, we discern the Lord’s body (1 Cor. 11:27-29). “Unworthily” in verse 27 is an adverb, not an adjective, describing the manner of partaking, not the worth or non-worth of the worshiper. As we partake, we are to center our minds upon the Lord’s death. If we partake with our minds elsewhere, then we become guilty of His death and stand condemned. As we partake of the Supper, we must do so in a state of unity. We not only have fellowship (communion) with the Godhead but with one another. Congregational divisions and malice between Christians will prevent this communion so that “it is not possible to eat the Lord’s supper” (11:20—ASV).

Finally, there is the question of when we are to partake of the Lord’s table. Immediately after the establishment of the kingdom (the church), Luke records: “And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine

and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42). Here it simply states that they continued steadfastly in partaking of the Lord’s Supper without giving any specific details as to when. As Paul corrects the errors concerning the communion at Corinth, he simply states, “For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord’s death till he come” (1 Cor. 11:26). Both of these passages show a regular practice but do not specifically tell us **when**.

However, if we take the 1 Corinthians passage, when we view it in its wider context, it does indicate when the “as often as” is. The wider context begins at the first of chapter eleven and continues to the first part of chapter sixteen with the contribution. In connection with the contribution they are told to give upon the first day of the week. Thus, we must conclude that the Lord’s Supper was also to be taken upon the first day of the week.

Confirmation of the above is given within the pages of the New Testament. It was Paul’s intention to be in Jerusalem by Pentecost (Acts 20:16). Yet, when he arrives in Troas (on Monday), he delays his journey for seven days. The only reason we can conclude is to partake of the communion with these brethren. Paul knew that Sunday was the day the disciples came to eat the Supper and this was the purpose of their coming together. The day after eating the Supper with them he continued his journey:

And we sailed away from Philippi after the days of unleavened bread, and came unto them to Troas in five days; where we abode seven days. And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight (20:6-7).

The brethren did not partake of the Supper on any day but the first day of the week, which is Sunday. If they partook of it on some other day, Paul would not have had to wait seven days to eat it with them. This is the only day the Bible authorizes Christians to eat the Lord's Supper. Since we can only do things which God has authorized (Col. 3:17), the **only** day we may partake of the Lord's Supper is Sunday. This is the day of our Lord's resurrection (Luke 24:1) and is truly the Lord's day (Rev. 1:10).

Preaching

When the church gathered together to worship, there was preaching or teaching taking place: "And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight" (Acts 20:7). Immediately after the establishment of the church, we observe: "And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers" (2:42). Doctrine is teaching; thus they continued in preaching and teaching, and that preaching was a part of their worship.

Preaching demands a preacher, as Paul was doing at Troas (20:7). A preacher's work is to preach the Bible. Paul gives a great charge to a young preacher:

I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine (2 Tim. 4:1-2).

He is to be preaching the Word no matter what people think about it, or as one reportedly said, "When they like

it and when they don't like it." The preacher is to reprove, rebuke, and exhort. It is interesting to note that two of the three are what men refer to as negative preaching. "Reproving" is to bring something to light or expose, then to convict someone of something and thus to correct them. "Rebuking" is to charge or admonish sharply. It is what our Lord did in regard to evil spirits (Matt. 17:18; Mark 1:25; 9:25; Luke 4:35,41; 9:42), the winds (Matt. 8:26; Mark 4:39; Luke 8:24), a fever (Luke 4:39), and the disciples (Mark 8:33; Luke 9:55). "Exhorting" is to give comfort to and to encourage, strengthen, and admonish.

In preaching the Word we must preach **all** the Word. Paul was free from the blood of all men because he declared all of God's Word: "Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God" (Acts 20:26-27). If we fail to preach the parts of the Bible dealing with man's eternal destiny, and men are lost because of it, then preachers and elders will also be lost (cf. Ezek. 3:17-21; 33:1-9).

In preaching, we must "hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 1:13). In holding fast the sound Word, we will warn against false doctrine. Paul tells the young preacher, "As I besought thee to abide still at Ephesus, when I went into Macedonia, that thou mightest charge some that they teach no other doctrine" (1 Tim. 1:3). Later in this letter Paul informs us that the Spirit has spoken clearly concerning those who will "depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils" (4:1). After specifying some false doctrines which will cause some to fall away, he tells Timothy, "If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine, whereunto thou hast attained" (4:6).

One cannot adequately warn against false doctrine without exposing the false teacher. This is what inspiration, by the hand of Paul, did as we read of Hymenaeus and Alexander (1:20), Phygellus and Hermogenes (2 Tim. 1:15), Hymenaeus and Philetus (2:17-18), Demas (4:10), and Alexander the coppersmith (4:14). Likewise, in our preaching today, we must expose false doctrines (such as grace or faith only, divorce and remarriage, instrumental music, etc.) and the people who teach such (such as Rubel Shelly, Max Lucado, Jim Woodroof, Marvin Phillips, etc.).

The preacher must not be an ear-tickler:

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables (2 Tim. 4:3-4).

The preaching is to please God, not man: "For do I now persuade men, or God? or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ" (Gal. 1:10). Thus, the faithful preacher will preach the powerful Gospel of Christ (Rom. 1:16-17), knowing that it alone has the power to save man's soul. He will not change or alter God's message. He recognizes the solemnity of the occasion and does not turn the preaching service into a time to entertain people or simply give nice after-dinner speeches. He recognizes that preaching the Truth is not a preaching of a social gospel (dealing with the social ills of society). He realizes that the work of the church is spiritual (John 18:36), to save souls (Luke 19:10), and only the pure, unadulterated Gospel can save. Thus, his goal is to "take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them:

for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee" (1 Tim. 4:16).

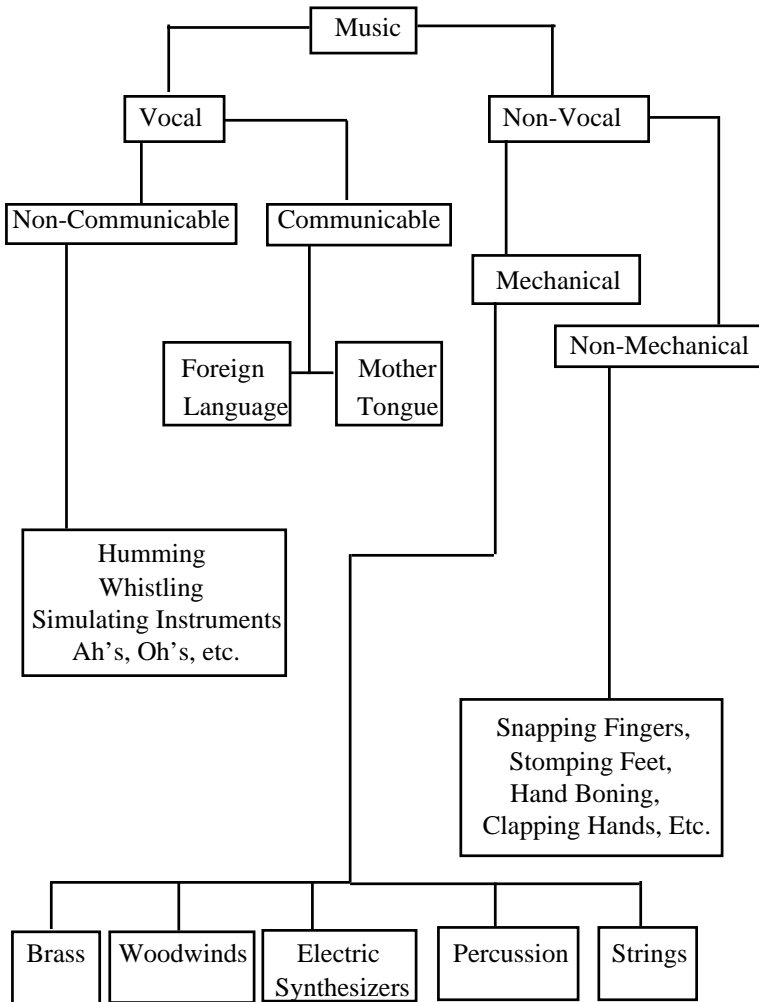
Conclusion

What a wonderful privilege God has granted to us, that we can worship Him who made all things. Yet, even as God gave a pattern to make the tabernacle in the Old Testament, God has given us a pattern by which to worship Him today. For our worship to be acceptable to Him, we must follow that pattern as well as worship with the proper attitude of heart. May we ever set our minds to worship our God in spirit and in truth.

Endnote

1 Gus Nichols, "The Church of Christ—Its Worship (Specific)," **The Church of Christ—Essential, All-Sufficient, Indestructible, Perpetually Relevant**, ed. Thomas B. Warren (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1971), p. 265.

Kinds Of Music



CHAPTER 26

Innovations In Worship: Past, Present, Future

Gary Summers

Introduction: The Future

2001: A Church Oddity

JACK AND HIS FAMILY park their vehicle on level 6 of the parking garage and walk to the bank of elevators. Momentarily, they enter one with some other folks, descend rapidly to street level, and exit into a throng of people heading into the lobby of the Cutting Edge Church of Christ. This morning they do not recognize any of the 15,000 people who have gathered together for worship, but they take their usual seats in Section B, Row 15.

They all put their earphones on and turn on their computer monitors, which are attached to the backs of the seats in front of them. “Stop playing Minesweeper,” the mother chastises her seven-year-old son. It is almost time for Bible study. Every screen has a menu with appropriate options for each age group. Jack chooses to continue with “Growing the Church Through Mass Marketing Techniques.” His wife always enjoys “Meditations from Walden Pond.” Their ten-year-old daughter is studying the “Sensitive Sex Education” course, and their son is learning “Good Versus Evil, As Taught in **Star Wars**.”

The teachers’ classes were live from a studio in another building. There are several small soundproof

rooms with a whiteboard, markers, a podium, an easel for charts, and a few technicians. Periodically, the teacher poses questions, and the students type in answers. The assistant monitors these and relays an appropriate message for the teacher which appears on the TelePrompter. The message might say, "Some students are confused on the second point," or, "You look nervous today; don't talk so fast."

After the class there is a fifteen-minute break for those who must use the restroom. During this time the band comes in. Churches of Christ were the last religious group to use instruments in the worship, but they at last decided that they just could not get the "gospel" to people unless they offered elaborate musical programs, as all the other large religious groups did. Now the arena really rocked with the raucous sounds of happy worshipers. The words to the songs appeared on everyone's computer screen.

The musical "praise" lasted fifteen minutes and was followed by the weekly 5-minute message from Max Staccato, broadcast via satellite to congregations all over America. He had been the unanimous choice for spokesman to address brethren on their computer screens nationwide by virtue of his unique ability to express deep thoughts in short, shallow sentences.

The next twenty minutes were devoted to the sermon for the morning. For those not interested in the speaker on the stage, the earphones and computer screens held a variety of options. Children could receive a rousing message from a youth minister, and the elderly could absorb a more pastoral presentation from a wise and sedate retired preacher. Everyone was allowed to specify whichever gender was preferred. But no matter what the choice, each message was completed in precisely twenty minutes for purposes of synchronicity; the ten-minute drama began promptly at the conclusion of the sermon.

The Lord's Supper followed immediately after; it only took five minutes, even with so many people gathered together, because several droids were assigned to each section. They were quick and efficient. The offering was then collected when each worshiper placed his credit card in a slot on the computer monitor and dialed up the amount of that week's offering before swiftly removing it.

The last five minutes were reserved for advertisements and a one-minute electronic closing meditation:

Be sure to stop at our deli on your way out to pick up Sunday dinner for your family; as always, there are a variety of choices. If you will be on vacation soon, or involved in golfing, hunting, or fishing, you won't want to take time out of your busy schedule to find where the nearest electronic church meets; so be prepared to worship wherever you are by taking your battery-powered laptops with you. You can also stock up today on Communion Snackpacks, courtesy of Wineskins, Incorporated; they're available in both fermented and unfermented forms.

Don't forget to read your devotional e-mails at the office or at school; these are free to all our members. Stop by for the latest in T-shirts and swimwear in our Witnessing Apparel Boutique. Browse through our bookstore, where you can find the latest religious jewelry, WWJD bracelets, and various inspirational items. This evening, from 6:00 to 8:00, a guest band will be performing: it's the ecumenical and popular group, Nuns and Moses. This is a show you won't want to miss. See you then, and have a great week.

Jack and his family arose from their chairs and departed with the crowds. They felt so refreshed and marveled at how much had been packed into just one hour's time. As Jack reflected on the improvements in the worship, he chuckled at the way he had once endured forty-five minute sermons, replete with texts that seemed so irrelevant to modern living. This new arrangement was much faster-paced and more interesting. Furthermore, no one any longer felt embarrassed to bring friends to worship since the emphasis had changed from stale issues to third millennium challenges. "How pleased God must be," thought Jack, as he punched the elevator button to the sixth floor.¹

Forward To The Past

Progress?

The above scenario serves as our look at some current and possible future innovations in the worship, but this exercise in fantasy will probably be dull compared to the thoughts and imaginations of those liberated souls in the vanguard of the current apostasy.

Sometimes regress is better than progress. Kings Hezekiah and Josiah realized that the spiritual progress that had occurred in Israel prior to their reigns was not progress at all. Under Hezekiah, the people went out and broke down the sacred pillars, cut down the wooden images, and threw down the high places and the altars "until they had utterly destroyed them all" (2 Chron. 31:1).² A few years later, Josiah purged Judah of the high places, the wooden images, the carved images, and the molded images. He also authorized the breaking down of the altars of the Baals (34:3-4).

When society advances in rebellion against, rejection of, and disobedience to God, such can hardly be termed

progress. The only thing these two godly kings could do to move forward was to return to the past. Progress, in their case, meant returning to the law of God, which had been cast aside. Today many in the church (who are leading others) have either forsaken the Scriptures, or they have never learned fundamental truths. We need to move forward to the past—to the first century when God’s Word was taught, whether orally or by epistle (2 Thess. 2:15). Abiding in the teachings of Christ is the only safe route to heaven.

The First Change In Worship

Man, however, has never been content to walk in God’s ways. First, Adam and Eve transgressed the commandment God gave them concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; second, Cain changed the worship to suit himself. Some may doubt the accuracy of this statement, but a consideration of the pertinent facts will confirm the validity of the idea:

1. *God has always commanded the kind of worship He desires.* Either it was the custom (instituted earlier in the lives of their parents) to bring to God an animal sacrifice, which required the shedding of blood, or God specifically commanded these two young men to do so. The only other alternative is that they just decided to bring a gift on their own, but the next point denies this notion.

2. *“By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain...”* (Heb. 11:4). Some have theorized that Abel’s offering was better because of its quality, which could also be true, but that was not the basis for God’s rejection (see point four).

3. *Actions said to be performed “by faith” are done in response to what God has commanded.* “So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of

God” (Rom. 10:17). In other words, Abel offered up what God commanded.

4. *The blood that Abel shed in preparing the animal sacrifice was for the atonement of sins.* As the writer of Hebrews was comparing the covenants, he wrote that Christians have come “to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel” (Heb. 12:24). To what blood is this verse referring? It cannot be comparing the Lord’s blood being shed with Abel’s blood being shed, because Abel’s was not spilled as a sacrifice, nor was he put to death as part of any covenant. The comparison involves the blood being shed for sins. Therefore, Abel’s personal blood is not under consideration; rather, it is the blood he shed in the animal sacrifice that is being compared to Christ’s blood as our sacrifice, which “speaks better things.” As Albert Barnes put it:

The meaning here is, that the blood of Jesus speaks better things than what Abel did; that is, that the blood of Jesus is the **reality** of which the offering of Abel was a **type**. Abel proclaimed by the sacrifice which he made the great truth that salvation could be only by a bloody offering—but he did this only in a typical and obscure manner; Jesus proclaimed it in a more distinct and better manner by the reality.³

A consideration of all these texts leads to the following conclusion: God commanded Cain and Abel to bring to Him a blood sacrifice. Abel did as God commanded, but Cain possibly reasoned in this way:

I know what God commanded, but I’m not a keeper of sheep, and I really don’t want to slaughter one anyway. I’m a tiller of the ground;

I spend all my time in that endeavor, and it's a noble calling—the same occupation that Dad had at the very beginning. Surely, God would want me to give him something that represents me—who I am—rather than another animal. I think that God will be pleased with what I bring to Him.

Of course, all of the above reasoning grants unto Cain the benefit of the doubt. He could have said, “I don't care what God wants; here's what I'm going to give Him.” In effect, no matter what reasoning process is used to justify a person's actions, it does eventually boil down to such a crude statement. God refuses to accept worship which is not in accordance with His instructions.

The Golden Calf

As we move to the second book of the Old Testament, we find an innovation introduced barely a month after the people heard God say, “You shall not make for yourself any carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in the heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (Exod. 20:4). While Moses was on the mountain for forty days, the people influenced Aaron to make a molded calf, and they proclaimed that it was a representation of the god who delivered them out of Egypt (32:4).

Why did they do it? Was an invisible God too vague for their tastes? Did they need some sort of representation of God so that they could bow before Him? Or was it simply from years of being influenced by the Egyptians? Regardless of the motivation, the people were punished swiftly. No one has the right to tamper with or alter in any way God's commandments or God's instructions regarding worship.

Nadab And Abihu

The earlier example of Cain's changing what God commanded can only be seen through a study of several passages and then drawing the appropriate conclusion. With Nadab and Abihu the transgression is seen quite readily. These two sons of Aaron "offered profane fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them" (Lev. 10:1). The first thing wrong is that they did not use the fire appointed for that specific purpose. The second error, related to the first, was that they used fire which God had not commanded them to use. Both actions are sinful.

This tragic event introduces the subjects of **authorization** and the **law of exclusion**, which are amplified in the New Testament. The New Testament clearly teaches that "whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus..." (Col. 3:17). If Christians would just be content to carry out those things that He has appointed for us to do, we would be so busy that we would probably not have time to dream up unauthorized innovations.

The law of exclusion is set forth clearly here, in other Old Testament passages, and in Hebrews 7:14. In explaining the reason that Jesus could not be a priest while upon the earth, the writer states, "For it is evident that our Lord arose from Judah, of which tribe Moses spoke nothing concerning priesthood." What this verse means is that God authorized the Levites to be priests, just as He specified the fire to be used by Nadab and Abihu. Jesus recognized that someone from the tribe of Judah had no authority to be a priest under that covenant. He did not make Himself an exception, saying, "I'm God; I can be a priest if I want to." Jesus waited until the covenant was changed to become our high priest. God does not violate His own laws.

Fire went out from the Lord and devoured Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:2). But suppose God had asked them to justify their actions before He punished them. About all they could offer in the way of a defense is the oft-heard phrase (particularly with reference to instrumental music), “But You didn’t say **not** to do it.” When God specifies what He wants, that very specificity closes down all other options. The question is not, “Where do the Scriptures condemn or forbid a practice?”; the question must be, “Where do the Scriptures authorize it?”

God’s people stand condemned for doing those things He has not authorized. If anyone transgressed God’s covenant by serving other gods and worshiping them, he was to be put to death. God told the Israelites that they were not to worship the sun or the moon or any of the host of heaven “which I have not commanded” (Deut. 17:3). Similar phraseology is to be found in Jeremiah 7:31, 19:5, and 32:35. When it comes to correct worship, God specifies both **what** and **how** something is to be done. Our goal must be to submit and obey humbly. We should never give to God, or conclude that He will accept, unauthorized substitutes.

In effect, Nadab and Abihu were saying, “We know what God has commanded with respect to the fire to be used, but this fire will do as well; let’s use it.” In other words, “Our thoughts and reasoning on this subject are as good as God’s. If a substitute makes sense to us, it will make sense to Him, also. He surely won’t mind a little insignificant change like this.” God declared His views on the matter in a forceful and unforgettable way.

Jeroboam

Although Jeroboam had been selected by God to be king over the northern kingdom when the split came in the days of Rehoboam (1 Kings 11:29-39), he did not trust

God enough to realize that He would maintain His kingdom also. Fearing that Israel would recover from their rage and seek unity with Judah, perhaps even killing him in the process (12:26-27), he instituted measures to prevent such an occurrence. He set up a golden calf in Bethel and another in Dan to keep the Israelites from returning to Jerusalem. He provided a visual object so that they could have something fixed in their minds. Since the Levites remained in Jerusalem, he made priests “from every class of people, who were not the sons of Levi” (12:31). And he ordained a feast like the one in Judah, but he scheduled it a month later.

“Now this thing became a sin...” (12:30). This system of false worship remained until the captivity over two hundred years later. Imagine how many people this decision of Jeroboam affected. For two centuries all of those who were born were taught (and consequently practiced) error from their youth upward—just as many today are taught the false concept of denominationalism with its attendant errors. How sad for children to picture God as a golden calf; the misconception would be so ingrained in them that they would dismiss the truth of an invisible God as ludicrous. The longer the kingdom continued, the more entrenched the false system of worship would become.

At the time of the captivity God inspired the following indictment to be written of the king:

Then Jeroboam drove Israel from following the Lord, and made them sin a great sin. For the children of Israel walked in the sins of Jeroboam which he did; they did not depart from them (2 Kings 17:21b-22).

These verses tell us, first, that all of Jeroboam’s innovations were unauthorized. Second, getting people to

participate in these changes was a **great** sin. Third, the people ceased to follow the Lord, which is always the result of false worship. Fourth, the departure was ongoing and never repented of. For this reason, we must be careful not to incorporate any ideas or practices that lack Biblical authority: once they are introduced, it is difficult to ever get them removed.

How many congregations, for example, have removed instrumental music once it has made its entrance into the worship? Even though just about every major religious group opposed it at one time, they all use it now and seldom even consider that God never authorized its use in New Testament worship. How important it is to evaluate all things to be certain that there is a “thus saith the Lord” behind everything we do!

Malachi

The Old Testament closes with the unfortunate development of insincere worship. Most of the time, unacceptable worship involved departures from the Truth. However, this book focuses on inappropriate attitudes. God rejected their worship because their heart was not in it. They said of worship, “Oh, what a weariness!” (Mal. 1:13). The quality of their offerings was substandard (1:13-14). They were treating God as a third-rate deity instead of the Author of all their blessings. He did not tolerate the situation and refused to accept their offerings.

Worship In The New Testament

One could hardly expect that Satan would not suggest changes in New Testament worship. The Judaizing teachers attempted to bring back elements of the Law of Moses, but Christian doctrine and Christian worship are both different from what God commanded under the Law. Circumcision was not a part of the new covenant (1 Cor. 7:17-20), and

Jerusalem was not the only place for God's children to worship (John 4:20-21).

The Corinthians invented ways to misuse the spiritual gifts that God had given to them. When leading in prayer or prophesying (in special gatherings for women only), they were not covering their heads (1 Cor. 11:2-16).⁴ The Lord's Supper had become confused with a common meal; some were guilty of the body and blood of the Lord (11:17-34). Confusion in the assembly (rather than orderliness), and an infatuation with speaking in tongues, plagued the Corinthian church.⁵

Some of these brethren were communing with the table of demons, a custom which Paul rebuked (10:19-21). Such a practice is tantamount to stating that the worship of demons and the worship of God through Christ are equal. If members of the body of Christ cannot be joined with harlots because they would become one spirit with them (6:15-17), then would not eating meats in an idol's temple make him one in spirit with the demon worshipers?

Paul also takes issue briefly with asceticism when he says of the refusal of some to abstain from legitimate, fleshly appetites, "These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and the neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh" (Col. 2:23). Most departures from the Word of God do not involve being stricter than the Scriptures; the majority of errors involve loosing where God has bound.

Peter deals with brethren who encouraged moral laxity (2 Pet. 2:18-22), and many think that the doctrine of the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:6,15) permitted unholy behavior. The way people present and conduct themselves in the community reflects upon the church and its ability to offer up proper worship. We cannot be profane in our

speech and actions and then expect God to accept our adoration as sincere.

Besides the Judaizing teachers and those who practiced licentiousness, there was some Sadduceean influence in the church at Corinth, which compelled Paul to defend the resurrection (1 Cor. 15). Incipient Gnosticism had already convinced some that Jesus only appeared to have a body. This doctrine continued far beyond the close of the New Testament. Muhammad thought that the person crucified only resembled Jesus—that God had taken His dead body to heaven.⁶

Why mention various doctrines in connection with worship? Jesus connected them when He quoted Isaiah: “And in vain they worship Me, teachings as doctrines the commandments of men” (Matt. 15:9). The point is this: **if we consistently teach and practice error, we invalidate our worship.** What is the context in which Jesus made this statement? The scribes and Pharisees had a way of getting around the fifth commandment: “Honor your father and mother.” Rather than provide for their parents’ needs, they would inform them that the money designated for that purpose had been dedicated to an even higher cause—the temple. They also found ways to weasel out of that bargain.

What is significant about this text is that, first of all, it rests on an implication rather than a direct command. God never said, “Support your elderly parents,” but He considered it part of honoring them. Second, this supposed loophole encouraged continuous error. Third, it, therefore, made their worship vain. Today, when a congregation’s leaders permit teachings, such as that members can divorce and remarry at will or that we can fellowship as brethren those who have never obeyed the Gospel, and some follow those false doctrines, then that church’s worship becomes **vain**. The few faithful members

remaining ought to quit wasting their time, realize that their worship, too, is vain, and find a faithful church.

The book of Revelation presents its message in very colorful language with black-and-white applications. The reader is treated to heavenly scenes of true worship (chps. 4-5), but later he is confronted with the unpleasant fact that “all the world...worshipped the dragon” (13:3-4). Ultimately, the world and the faithful will be separated and judged (chps. 21-22). From that point on, all the saved will know only true worship throughout eternity.

The Nature Of Worship

There are two basic elements of worship that are pleasing to God: attitude and truth. They are found together in a number of passages both in the Old and New Testaments:

1. Joshua told the people to **serve** God “in sincerity and truth” (Josh. 24:14).

2. Samuel advised the people similarly: “...serve Him in truth with all your heart...” (1 Sam. 12:24).

3. Isaiah first writes it, and Jesus repeats it: “These people draw near to me with their mouth, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Matt. 15:8-9). The passage describes two things that are lacking: the proper attitude and truth.

4. Jesus also stated these principles in a positive manner: “...true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth” (John 4:23).

5. Paul thanked God that the Romans “obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine”—in other words, the Gospel (Rom. 6:17).

6. After Paul had commanded the Corinthian church to withdraw fellowship from the brother living with his

father's wife, he exhorted them to "keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Cor. 5:8).

Of these six passages, one refers to the way in which the Gospel is to be obeyed, three spring from the context of worship, and two involve our service to God. Four use the word "truth," one speaks of obeying that form of doctrine (truth), and the sixth mentions the alternative to truth (the commandments of men). Attitude is expressed by the phrases "in sincerity," "in spirit," "from the heart," "with all your heart," and the opposite of all these—"their heart is far from Me."

A lack of balance results in our worship or service if either of these elements is absent, and vanity ensues. Although he is a staunch Calvinist, John MacArthur, Jr., states the fact of the matter regarding worship in the context of the Samaritans versus the Jews:

The true enemies of true worship are Gerizim and Jerusalem. Sincerity, enthusiasm, and aggressiveness are important, but they must be based on truth. And truth is foundational, but if it doesn't result in an eager, excited, enthusiastic heart, it is deficient. Enthusiastic heresy is heat without light. Barren orthodoxy is light without heat.⁷

Spirit Without Truth

Probably no greater example of zeal apart from truth in the Old Testament is the occasion in which the 450 false prophets of Baal called fervently for their deity to send down fire to consume the sacrifice they had prepared. These men "leaped about the altar they had made" and "cut themselves, as was their custom, with knives and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them" (1 Kings

18:26,28). People can believe with very powerful emotions that they are doing the right thing—yet be tragically mistaken.

MacArthur gives the following, modern-day illustration of the same problem:

No group of worshipers is more spirited than the fanatic Shiite Muslims who once a year slit their scalps with razors and beat themselves in the head with the flat side of their swords to stimulate bleeding. Men, boys, and even infants have their shaved heads lacerated with swift chopping strokes of a straight razor and then march around the square before the mosque, bleeding profusely while thousands watch and chant. They do it to celebrate the death of a Muslim leader more than a dozen centuries ago, and they see their hideous display as worship.⁸

Worshipping In Spirit

Worshipping in the proper spirit does not imply fanaticism of the previous description, but it does involve the whole person, from the inside out. Although we worship differently than David did, his enthusiasm is unmistakable:

Bless the Lord, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless His holy name!
 Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits:
 Who forgives all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases,
 Who redeems your life from destruction,
 Who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies,
 Who satisfies your mouth with good things,
 So that your youth is renewed like the eagles
 (Psm. 103:1-5).

Even when he sinned, David knew what needed to be changed. He knew that his heart allowed lust to lead him into sin and that the heart is the place where correction needed to occur: “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart—these, O God, You will not despise” (Psm. 51:17). He also asked, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (51:10).

In his book, **The Existence and Attributes of God**, Stephen Charnock wrote:

Without the heart it is no worship; it is a stage play; an acting a part without being that person really which is acted by us: a hypocrite, in the notion of the word, is a stage-player... We may be truly said to worship God, though we [lack] perfection; but we cannot be said to worship Him, if we [lack] sincerity.⁹

In our sound-bite society of today, attention spans are brief. **Attention spans are brief!** Even when we read, our minds wander, and we lose concentration. Some have a problem during worship; perhaps they have spiritual ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder). They may wonder what happened to the commercial break every ten minutes. Worshipers in spirit must exercise self-discipline to make sure they are fervently involved in every act of worship.

Truth Without Spirit

The Bible also furnishes us with examples of those who had a knowledge of the Truth, but it had ceased to do them any good. There are at least two directions one can travel under this heading. The first is to be certain that every jot and tittle is obeyed. Although this individual may lack love, mercy, and compassion, he will nevertheless demand that God’s law be obeyed—to the letter. Joy is

very limited because, although he obeys God, it is not from the heart. Fear may be the motivation hardest at work in this person's mind. God's holy Law becomes a weapon, as evidenced by such comments as "Look, Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath" (Matt. 12:2), or, "This man, if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him, for she is a sinner" (Luke 7:39). Legalism frequently manifests itself in self-righteousness, which poses a real danger for those of us who emphasize truth.

The Law becomes an intellectual game for them to play: "How can we get around this business about honoring father and mother?" In Jesus' case, they did not hesitate to violate the Law they claimed to so jealously defend. They hired **false witnesses** against Jesus, which violated the ninth commandment. They killed Him without a just cause, thus transgressing the sixth commandment. They coveted His popularity but could not attain it, so they sought out a pretext for putting Him to death. Legalists frequently act contrary to the Law—when their hearts become set on something sinful.

The second pitfall for those who adhere to the Truth is lethargy. They may leave their first love (Rev. 2:1-7), become lukewarm (3:14-22), or act like walking corpses (3:1-6). How many members of the Lord's church know the Truth? They hear it each week and praise the one who presents it. They know the Truth, love the Truth, understand the Truth, teach the Truth, and defend the Truth. The problem is that some simply do not practice the Truth. It would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for them to bring one soul to Christ.

They may live an exemplary moral life, contribute generously to the church, and devote themselves to a study of the Word, but they do not involve themselves in the ongoing work of the church that needs to be done. Perhaps

they have experienced discouragement along the way, or their perception of themselves is that they have no talent. For whatever reason, they are content to attend worship only. These are, perhaps, to be even more pitied than those who possess zeal without knowledge. They have the knowledge; they just refuse to act on it.

Worshipping In Truth

Despite the problems that attend emphasis upon truth to the near exclusion of spirit, it is nevertheless the case that truth is a vital element of true worship. Solomon taught his son, "Buy the truth, and do not sell it" (Prov. 23:23). Jesus told His disciples that, if they continued in His Word, they would know the truth, and the truth would set them free (John 8:31-32). In the garden, He prayed that the Father would sanctify them through His Word, which is truth (17:17).

Furthermore, Jesus was as concerned about correct doctrine as He was about sincerity. He not only warned against teaching the commandments of men as doctrine (Matt. 15:9), He specifically cautioned His disciples to be wary of the leaven (doctrine) of the Sadducees and the Pharisees (16:11-12). During the last week of His earthly existence, He debated truth with His enemies. He told the Sadducees that they knew neither the Scriptures nor the power of God (22:29). If doctrine (truth) were not important, why did Jesus spend His last week discussing it? And why did He warn His disciples about false doctrine if believing it carries with it no harmful (even fatal) consequences?

Because of the legitimate emphasis which Jesus placed upon truth, it is disheartening to see so many once-faithful brethren cast it behind their backs and forever more ignore it. Some have determined that truth is a hindrance to "unity"; so they have in its place constructed

a glass cathedral on a foundation of sand. If it lasts until the Day of Judgment, it will be shattered by the piercing sound of the last trumpet.

No one has the right to set truth aside in favor of “self-imposed religion.” The authority of man is without weight. Cain found that out when God rejected his offering. Those who think that God is obligated to accept whatever worship we choose to give Him should reconsider Genesis 4. Worship that is not according to truth is that which is designed to please us rather than God. The next time **we** create a universe and bring to life all of the creatures in it, we will have the right to tell them how to worship us. In the mean time, however, we ought to listen to God. Apart from following the revelation of God’s will, worship is false, vain, and according to our own will.

Instrumental Music:

The Mother Of Modern Innovations

Just as Kings Hezekiah and Josiah realized that religious apostasy dominated their kingdoms and decided to progress to the past (return to the authority of the Law), so did many religious leaders of a later era form a similar assessment, beginning with Martin Luther in Germany and culminating with wide acceptance of the “restoration” concept in America three centuries later. Many came out of religious denominations and were pleased to call themselves Christians. Manmade rules and regulation were cast aside. True spiritual progress was achieved by going back to the Bible. Principles which established Biblical authority were once again brought to light; thousands were ready for such a return. There was as much enthusiasm for this casting aside of man’s creeds as there had been for throwing down the idols and heathen altars in the days of the kings of Judah.

But then came the melodeon at Midway, Kentucky, in 1860.¹⁰ After the Civil War, the idea of adding instruments to the worship became more and more popular. Finally, after about forty years of torturous conflict, only a few churches remained faithful to the ideology of pleasing God in all things. Brethren desired to please themselves. For several years, probably the only difference between the churches of Christ and the Christian Church was the use of instruments (and the unauthorized missionary societies).

However, once people figure out that they have adopted a posture of authority being unnecessary, it does not take them too long to move on to other things that the Bible does not command, provide an example for, or imply. Once Christians lose respect for the ways in which the Bible authorizes, anything becomes permissible. Eventually, digressives notice that, as a skier out of control on a mountain, they cannot stop, but the realization comes too late; they must continue the descent. Likewise, the no-restraint, “free-in-Christ” crowd will hurtle into eternity unprepared, freefalling all the way to the fires of damnation to join Cain, Nadab and Abihu, Jeroboam, and all others who choose to worship in the way that suits them best.

The New Testament On Singing

Singing is a happy and joyous activity. Long before mankind ever devised a melody or wrote lyrics, the angels engaged freely in the practice (Job 38:7). In the Old Testament, God’s people praised Him through singing, accompanied by instruments (2 Chron. 29:25). In the New Testament, however, there is no mention of them. Not only is there no command that they be used, there is not a single example of Jesus or the apostles ever using them. Furthermore, an implication of their use is totally lacking.

None of the apostles carried around a harmonica; Jesus did not ask for Peter to play a few notes on his piccolo to get them started as they went out to the Mount of Olives. Paul did not ask Silas if his Jew's harp had survived their beating, nor did he say, "Let's just clap our hands in place of the drumbeat we usually have." And none of the letters that Paul wrote contained even a single instruction for an accompanist. What a strange and amazing set of circumstances these are—that no instructions were ever necessary on the use of instruments!

What does the New Testament teach on the subject of singing? All of the passages are listed below:

1. And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives (Matt. 26:30).

2. And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives (Mark 14:26).

3. But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them (Acts 16:25).

4. ...as it is written, For this reason I will confess to You among the Gentiles, and sing to Your name (Rom. 15:9).

5. What is the result then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding (1 Cor. 14:15).

6. How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification (14:26).

7. Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord (Eph. 5:19).

8. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord (Col. 3:16).

9. Saying, I will declare Your name to My brethren; in the midst of the congregation I will sing praise to You. (Heb. 2:12).

10. Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms (Jas. 5:13).

11. And they sang a new song... (Rev. 5:9).

12. And they sang as it were a new song before the throne...and no one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth (14:3).

13. And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb... (15:3).

These are the only verses that mention singing in any form in the entire New Testament. Not one of them mentions accompaniment. To be sure, John heard from heaven the sound as of harpers harping with their harps (Rev. 14:2), but there are three sounds that John heard, and they were not literal; they indicate certain qualities. Some have purposely missed the point of the metaphor and argued that there are literal harps in heaven. But even if there were, such would provide no authority for Christians to use them now. Heaven cannot serve as a standard for earth unless we are all prepared to remain single (Matt. 22:30).

Grant Wood is the artist famous for his painting **American Gothic**. At some time in the future, it may be necessary to restore the original, as has happened with so many other masterpieces. How would people react if, after the painstaking restoration, the picture was unveiled, and between the man and the woman is a hoe? “Wait a minute!” the crowd gasps. “What happened to the pitchfork?” The touch-up artist replies, “One farm tool is as good as another. What’s the big deal?” The crowd shouts, “But you were supposed to restore the painting, not change it.” The besieged man defends himself: “I did restore it—with one little alteration.”

People would be rightly upset. They might even cast this rejoinder at the man who took obvious liberties: “You can’t restore what was never there in the first place.” The above-described action is precisely what happened among those who were attempting to restore New Testament Christianity. Musical instruments can have no part in serious efforts to restore the church of the first century because musical instruments were not part of the worship. If it could be demonstrated that the original church and those who continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine played instruments of music in their worship of God, then it would be right to restore them, but neither the New Testament, nor secular history, can find them there. They therefore lack authority. Musical instruments must be **added**; they cannot be **restored**. As long as the earth stands, they will remain a sinful innovation, a monument to “self-imposed religion.”

Long before the instrument became an issue of fellowship, Thomas Campbell wrote a document called **The Declaration and Address**, in which, among other things, he said:

...nothing ought to be inculcated upon Christians as articles of faith; nor required of them as terms of communion; but what is expressly taught and

enjoined upon them, in the Word of God. Nor ought anything to be admitted, as of divine obligation, in their church constitution and managements, but what is expressly enjoined by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ and His apostles upon the New Testament church; either in expressed terms, or by approved precedent.

This paragraph is not true because of the stature of the person who wrote it; it is true because it reflects the Scriptures—particularly the authority principle of Colossians 3:17. Worship is not specifically mentioned, but doctrine is (articles of faith), and doctrine includes acceptable worship. We ought not do or practice anything that is not expressly enjoined by Jesus or the apostles in specific terms or by approved precedent (example).

Besides, Campbell was not the first one to recognize this principle. Some would have us believe that, in following restoration concepts, we are following mere men. The fact is, however, that we are doing nothing more than what Kings Hezekiah and Josiah were so highly praised for doing. Three hundred years before Campbell, there was a religious group attempting to do the same thing. The historian Mosheim says of the Anabaptists of the 1500's:

They were persuaded, that it was possible, by human wisdom, industry, and vigilance, to purify the church from the contagion of the wicked, and to restore it to the simplicity of its original constitution.¹¹

The idea of restoration is laudable. We demand that great caution be exercised in the restoration of paintings; will we settle for less concerning God's Divine Word? Accompanying our singing with instruments of music violates the spirit of New Testament teaching.

“We Are Not Alone”

Since there are so few today who oppose the innovation of instruments, some have thought that churches of Christ just want to be different. The fact is, however, that notable men from just about every religious group have opposed their entrance into the worship. M. C. Kurfrees wrote a monumental work nearly one hundred years ago entitled **Instrumental Music in the Worship** (288 pages). His fourteenth chapter contains fifty-five pages of evidence from “Encyclopedists, Historians, and Commentators.” Included below is just a smattering of some of the significant quotations:

Thomas Aquinas (the thirteenth century Catholic theologian whose name is still well-known): Our church does not use musical instruments, as harps and psalteries, to praise God withal, that she may not seem to Judaize.¹²

Professor John Girardeau (Presbyterian scholar): It has thus been proved, by an appeal to historical facts, that the church, although lapsing more and more into defection from the truth and into a corruption of apostolic practice, had no instrumental music for twelve hundred years; and that the Calvinistic Reformed Church ejected it from its services as an element of Popery, even the Church of England having come very nigh to its extrusion from her worship. The historical argument, therefore, combines with the Scriptural and the confessional to raise a solemn and powerful protest against its employment by the Presbyterian Church. It is heresy in the sphere of worship.¹³

Charles Buck (English Independent minister): Much has been said as to the use of instrumental music in the house of God. On the one side it is

observed that we ought not to object to it, because it assists devotion; that it was used in the worship of God under the Old Testament; and that the worship of heaven is represented by a delightful union of vocal and instrumental music. But on the other side, it is remarked that nothing should be done in or about God's worship without example or precept from the New Testament: that, instead of aiding devotion, it often tends to draw off the mind from the right object; that it does not accord with the simplicity of Christian worship; that the practice of those who lived under the ceremonial dispensation can be no rule for us; that not one text in the New Testament requires or authorizes it by precept or example, by express words or fair inference; and that the representation of the musical harmony in heaven is merely figurative language, denoting the happiness of the saints.¹⁴

Adam Clarke (a Methodist whose commentaries are still used by many): ...and I farther believe that the use of such instruments of music, in the Christian Church, is **without the sanction and against** the will of God; that they are subversive of the spirit of true devotion, and that they are **sinful**...I am an old man, and an old minister; and I here declare that I never knew them productive of any good in the worship of God; and have had reason to believe that they were productive of much evil. Music, **as a science**, I esteem and admire; but instruments of **music in the house of God** I abominate and abhor; and here I register my protest against all such corruptions in the worship of the Author of Christianity. The late venerable and most eminent divine, the Rev. **John Wesley**, who was a **lover of music**, and an **elegant poet**, when

asked his opinion of instruments of music being introduced into the chapels of the Methodists, said in his terse and powerful manner, "I have no objections to instruments of music in our chapels, provided they are neither heard nor seen." I say the same, though I think the expense of purchase had better be spared.¹⁵

Of **Charles Haddon Spurgeon** (the famous Baptist preacher who did not use instruments of music in the Metropolitan Tabernacle of London, where thousands gathered to hear him speak), Professor Girardeau said: he upholds an apostolic simplicity of worship. The great congregation which is blessed with the privilege of listening to his instructions has no organ "to assist" them in singing their praises to their God and Savior. They find their vocal organs sufficient. Their tongues and voices express the gratitude of their hearts.¹⁶

The purpose of these quotations is not to settle the issue; their value is that they enable us to see that churches of Christ have never been alone in their objections to the use of musical instruments as part of Christian worship. Furthermore, we should observe that the objections of these various religious leaders were not merely personal opinions. They cite exactly the same Biblical reasons that we do:

1. *Musical instruments were part of the Jewish, not the Christian, system* (Aquinas, Buck, Calvin).

2. *The church did not have the general practice of using instruments for twelve hundred years* (there are some isolated instances from about A.D. 800 to A.D. 1200).

3. *It lacks New Testament authority* (Col. 3:17), a principle recognized by Buck, Clarke, and Spurgeon.

Defense Of The Instrument

In his debate with Given O. Blakely, brother Alan Highers provided an overview of the arguments generally given in defense of the use of instrumental music.

1. He begins with the argument set forth by O. E. Payne in 1920,¹⁷ which G. C. Brewer assessed in the following manner:

O. E. Payne, who has given us the most pretentious book ever written on either side of this question, says on page 52 of that book: “Instrumental music unavoidably inheres in *psalmo*, and therefore to employ it is mandatory.” And on page 172 he says: “Henceforth we must unite in agreeing that if we forego musical instruments we cannot conform to the divine injunction to *psallein*.”¹⁸

Concerning that argument, Highers commented thus:

They had, at last, established their proof for instrumental music in the worship, but then they realized that the consequences of that argument were undesirable. They did not want to say that you **had** to have the instrument. They knew that Paul and Silas likely did not have one in prison in Acts 16:25 and so they largely abandoned the idea that it was required by the Greek.¹⁹

2. J. B. Briney and Ira Boswell, in 1923, argued that the instrument is **permitted** by the Greek, but not **required**, as per Payne.²⁰ The reader should be aware of the fact that, fifty years earlier, Briney had been foursquare against the instrument. He wrote the following:

We regard it as unauthorized and corrupting; as calculated to carnalize the worship.²¹

Let the plain truth be told: The introduction of the organ is no mere impropriety; it is a gross insult to the Lord Jesus Christ, and a sin against the God of Heaven. The observance of this Pauline principle will keep the instrument out while time lasts.²²

My conscience will not allow me to engage in singing as an act of worship, where there is “instrumental accompaniment.” A weak conscience, you say? Be it so, I demand that my weak conscience shall be respected. Remember, that when you introduce an organ into the worship, and thus wound my conscience, however weak it may be, you sin against Christ, and he will call you to account for it in the great day.²³

Unfortunately, Briney learned to live with the instrument, but he could never answer his own arguments against the practice.

3. Burton W. Barber and Julian O. Hunt argued that instruments are just aids.²⁴ Most people, however, can discern the difference between an aid and an addition. An aid, such as a songbook or a pitchpipe, does not change the nature of the fruit of our lips that ascends to the Father, but instruments alter the sound by adding to it (and occasionally drowning it out).

4. Don DeWalt devised the “you’re another” argument, which Highers explained this way:

It always makes me think of the two little boys arguing out by the back fence and one of them says to the other, “You’re a liar.” The other one answers and says, “You’re another.”

These brethren are saying to us, “It may be true that instrumental music is unauthorized, but ‘you’re another,’ because congregational singing is not authorized either.”²⁵

The fact is, however, that congregational singing certainly fits the criteria of Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16, although it would not restrict it to such meetings.

5. Given O. Blakely’s argument in the debate was that authority is not needed because worship is not regulated.²⁶ One wonders how there can be such a thing as false, vain, and will worship if worship is not regulated.

Several arguments of this kind have arisen—none with any merit. Some have demanded proof that singing is worship. What do they think the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders were doing in Revelation 5:8-9 as they fell down before the throne of the Lamb—shooting marbles? Anyone who can deny that the singing of praises to God is worship must be desperate for an argument to justify the use of instruments of music. And how can anyone read Exodus and Leviticus and not understand that correct (regulated) worship has always been important to God?

Summary

Following is a summary of some of the observations made on this subject²⁷:

1. Instrumental music is not commanded.
2. Therefore, instrumental music cannot be used by faith (Heb. 11:4), and it is as unacceptable to God as what Cain offered.
3. There is no New Testament example of Jesus, the apostles, or the church using instruments to accompany their worship. If there were even one, this discussion would be over.

4. There is no implication that instruments of music should ever be used in worshiping God.
5. Therefore, instruments of music lack Biblical authority (Col. 3:17).
6. Using instruments of music in worship is not according to the Truth (New Testament teaching), which was once for all delivered to the saints (John 16:12-13; 2 Pet. 1:3; Jude 3-4).
7. Instrumental music constitutes an unauthorized addition to the singing God commanded.
8. Changing the worship is always a great sin (2 Kings 17:21).
9. Instrumental music was not used by Christians generally for twelve hundred years, which makes the practice twelve hundred years too late.
10. Instrumental music cannot be restored to New Testament worship because it was never there in the first place.
11. A continual unauthorized practice will make the church's worship vain (Matt. 15:9).
12. Instrumental music destroys the fellowship that could otherwise exist. J. B. Briney, in his younger years, commented on this subject: "But, say the majority, we have determined to use the instrument, and you can either accept that or withdraw from the congregation. Here, now, is a new test of fellowship. Who has made it?"²⁸ It is an abomination before God to sow discord among brethren (Prov. 6:19).

The Present Distress

Having taken an innovative look at the future and seen the importance of advancing to the past principles taught in the Word of God, it remains to analyze the present. The bride of Christ is currently under assault from those who no longer believe in her but refuse to

disassociate themselves from her, which is typical of their dishonesty. Faithful brethren call them “liberals”; they fancy themselves to be “change agents,”²⁹ but, to paraphrase Shakespeare, a skunk by any other name would still stink.

Brother Goebel Music brought to light the departures of several men in a portion of his bestselling book, **Behold The Pattern** (1991). Brother Woodson’s book on “change agents” followed in 1994, and Dave Miller’s highly successful tome, **Piloting the Strait**, appeared in 1996. Various lectureships have also seen fit to discuss our current situation. In 1993, the Spiritual Sword did **The Restoration: The Winds of Change**, in 1994, Bellview did **Changes in the Church of Christ**, and, in 1995, the Memphis School of Preaching produced a volume as lengthy as the title indicates: **Heaven’s Imperative or Man’s Innovation: Shall We Restructure the Church of Christ?** (839 pages). All of these books are well worth studying and go into far greater detail than one meager chapter can.

But the leaders of the current apostasy were clever. They knew that suggestions to bring in instrumental music would alert brethren (especially the older ones) to the fact that unlawful innovations were on their way in again. This approach, after the well-known division of a century ago, would have been fatal, so they saved instrumental music for last. Instead they conducted “unity” meetings with the Christian Church, promising that they would not compromise. The purpose was just to get to know one another (translate “fellowship”).

Rubel Shelly, a former defender of the faith but now a leader of the apostasy, decided, “There are sincere, knowledgeable, devout Christians scattered among all the various denominations.”³⁰ How they got there remained a mystery until Max Lucado, a so-called “brother,” explained

that as long as people have good works and an even temperament—why, they must be Christians. Carroll Osburn (of ACU) proclaimed that fellowship should be broad enough to include those who differ on church organization, doctrine, worship, and “whether baptism is ‘for’ or ‘because of’ the remission of sins.”³¹

Once we begin to fellowship those in religious error, it is only a matter of time until we begin fellowshipping religious error itself. Such an inevitability was one of the reasons that God wanted the heathen nations in Canaan put to death:

Take heed to yourself, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land where you are going, lest it be a snare in your midst. But you shall destroy their altars, break their sacred pillars, and cut down their wooden images (for you shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God), lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and play the harlot with their gods and make sacrifice to their gods (Exod. 34:12-15).³²

If fellowship with the people of the land would lead Israel into idolatry, how much easier would it be to be led into denominationalism, which still purports to honor Christ?

About the same time as broader fellowship was being encouraged (as though this had not for decades been the message of W. Carl Ketcherside and Leroy Garrett), along came the Acapella Vocal Band, which was defended by many because this group did not use musical instruments; they just made noises that sounded like them. They began to open brethren’s ears to some of the possibilities of different types of music—and pleasant-sounding types at that.

This push for unity implied that doctrine does not matter (truth just gets in the way and causes factions). Coinciding with this erroneous notion is the postmodern philosophy that all truth is subjective anyway, so what any one of us believes is primarily irrelevant anyway. Recent political scandals have shown us that, so far as the general public is concerned, **truth does not matter and no one should be held accountable for his actions!**

In the sixties, the popular ideology was that God is dead. Current thought does not care if He is there, so long as truth is dead. When this philosophy is applied to Christianity, it suddenly is a small matter if we meet on the Lord's day or the Sabbath, if we worship with instruments or without, if we give out of our prosperity or resort to fund-raising techniques, if we preach the Gospel or use dramas. We will, if some have their way, allow any doctrine to be taught—or just choose not to discuss certain topics (a great portion of the Scriptures can be taught without covering certain subjects). We all know how Biblical “agreeing to disagree” is.

Certainly, we are in the midst of an apostasy that encompasses every aspect of salvation, worship, and doctrine. But Jesus still died for our sins, and God still rewards the faithful. Has there yet been invented a reason sufficient to keep us from fighting a good fight, finishing our course, and keeping the faith? That crown still awaits all those who love His appearing (2 Tim. 4:6-8). If neither death nor life, nor a number of other things, can separate us from the love of God, then neither will apostasy (Rom. 8:31-39).

Conclusion: The Example Of The Past And The Needs For The Present And Future

There is no easy formula to solve problems of such great magnitude, but one thing is certain—the faithful remnant that emerges from this current widespread

apostasy will face these same problems again! It may take twenty or a hundred years, but the process will repeat itself. If false doctrine could abound during the era of the apostles, how can we imagine that we will escape doctrinal problems? The suggestions below may sound trite, but the Word of God teaches that they will be sufficient:

1. *Know the Word of God.* It will always be the case that, if God's people are destroyed (spiritually), it will be due to a lack of knowledge (Hos. 4:6). Only the Word can build us up and give us an eternal inheritance (Acts 20:32). Furthermore, God's people need to hear the whole counsel of God (20:26-27).

2. *Respect the means by which the Scriptures authorize us to worship and practice Christianity.* Without holding fast to Colossians 3:17, we will repeat our current blunders swiftly.

3. *Love God* (Matt. 22:37-40). It is the greatest commandment for a reason. One cannot be devoted to His God and at the same time be willing to disobey Him and disregard His instructions. A love of God demands a love of His Word (the Truth), and all of us should be scrupulously honest in our study of the Scriptures and in the applications that we make. We do not want to bind where God has loosed, nor loose where He has bound. We should desire to please Him in all things.

4. *Be committed to our Lord Jesus Christ.* Paul made it clear that we owe no allegiance to any earthly man—not even the one who taught us the Gospel (1 Cor. 1:13). Jesus and His kingdom must have first priority in our lives (Matt. 6:33; Luke 14:26-27).

5. *Be steadfast and unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord; such labor is not in vain* (1 Cor. 15:58). After the current winds of change have uprooted the shallow vegetation among us, the next generation (and perhaps even later ones) will admire those who stood firm.

6. Pray for the souls of brethren and congregations as fervently as Paul did (Phil. 1:9-11).

7. Be evangelistic. Mourning over those who have “left legalism for grace” (as they put it) will only cause the engines of evangelism to stall. They have chosen to commit suicide upon the advice of a cadre of spiritual Kevorkians. So be it. There are yet those who need to hear the soul-saving truths of the Gospel, and the “change agents” have no distinctive message for them. The Gospel needs no improvements—certainly no watering down. Paul was not ashamed of the Gospel, and neither are we. Let us labor together as bold soldiers of the cross.

Endnotes

1 Thanks to Brad Price (Goshen, IN) and the college students at Pearl Street for many of these suggestions.

2 All Scripture references are from the New King James unless otherwise specified.

3 Albert Barnes, **Barnes’ Notes** (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House), p. 13:1:309.

4 For further information on this subject, see the five part series, **The Role of Women in the Church**, on the following Web site: www.pearlstreet.org.

5 See this writer’s article, “Atheists and Pagans Can Speak Gibberish,” **Pentecostalism**, ed. David Brown (Spring, TX; Contending for the Faith, 1999), pp. 355-388.

6 This material is found in **The Koran**, Sura 3, verse 48.

7 John MacArthur, Jr., **The Ultimate Priority** (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), p. 116.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid, p. 118.

10 Roy Deaver, “The Symbol at Midway,” **Gospel Advocate** (2 September 1976), pp. 567-568.

11 M. H. Tucker, ed., **Restoration Then and Now** (Knoxville, TN: East Tennessee School of Preaching and Missions, 1983), p. 13.

- 12 M. C. Kurfees, **Instrumental Music in the Worship** (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1969), p. 176.
- 13 Ibid, pp. 177-78.
- 14 Ibid, p. 180.
- 15 Ibid, pp. 181-82.
- 16 Ibid, p. 196.
- 17 **The Highers-Blakely Debate on Instrumental Music** (Denton, TX: Valid Publications, 1988), pp. 188-91.
- 18 G. C. Brewer, **A Medley on the Music Question** (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1948), p. 67.
- 19 **The Highers-Blakely Debate**, p. 187.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Earl Irvin West, **The Search for the Ancient Order**, Volume 2 (Indianapolis: Religious Book Service, 1950).
- 22 Kurfees, pp. 246-47.
- 23 Ibid, p. 246.
- 24 **The Highers-Blakely Debate**, p. 189.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Ibid, p. 188.
- 27 Many of these come from Alan Highers's chart in **The Highers-Blakely Debate**, p. 196.
- 28 West, pp. 85-86. See also the poignant article by Roy Deaver, "Play On, Miss Bertha," **Gospel Advocate** (25 October 1973), pp. 677,686.
- 29 William Woodson, **Change Agents and Churches of Christ** (Athens, AL: School of Biblical Emphasis, 1994), p. 5.
- 30 Goebel Music, **Behold the Pattern** (Colleyville, TX: Goebel Music Publications, 1991), p. 274.
- 31 Carroll D. Osburn, **The Peaceable Kingdom** (Abilene, TX: Restoration Perspectives, 1993), pp. 91-92.
- 32 See also Deuteronomy 7:1-5 and 12:1-4.

CHAPTER 27

The Mission Of The Lord's Church

Michael Light

Introduction

AS WITH MOST *BIBLICAL* topics, the mission of the Lord's body (the church) has been neglected and misunderstood by the masses. Unfortunately, many of the people currently "leading" the church are completely unaware of what God expects them, as members of the church, to be doing for the cause of the kingdom of His dear Son. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus promised to build His church. In Romans 1:16, Paul makes it clear that the Gospel is God's power to save. Mark 16:15 shows God's concern for all men and a desire that they all have the Gospel brought to them. And 1 Timothy 3:15 asserts that the church is "the pillar and the ground of the truth."

Putting all of these ideas together leaves one with the concept of the church being in the soul-saving business, which is precisely the same as the glorious mission of the Savior Himself (Luke 19:10). The fact that the New Testament church exists is not hard to prove (Acts 2:47). Yet, many members of this wonderful institution are in the dark as to what the mission, or work, of the church is. No doubt much of the confusion currently being manifested in the programs and activities of some congregations is due to ignorance of what God's will for the body of Christ is. The question of "What is the work or mission of the

church?" is one of utmost importance. We will look at what the Bible says about the work of the church by noticing the mission of God's people "past, present, and future."

What Is The Church?

This is a very fundamental question, yet in answering it we begin to gain insight as to its nature and mission. The church was planned by God from the beginning. Paul affirms this in Ephesians 3:10-12:

To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God, According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord: In whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him.

The church was not a mere afterthought of God, as men affirm, but rather the church was the eternally planned institution through which men have access to heaven.

In Matthew 16:18ff, Jesus promised to build His church:

And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Later, in Matthew 26:28, He adds, "For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins." In these passages Jesus promised to build His church and to shed His blood for the remission

of sins. This is important because, in Acts 20:28, Paul informs us: “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.”

Jesus made it clear that only His blood had the power to remit sins, while Paul affirmed members of the church are the ones for which Christ shed His blood. Therefore, remission of sins is only found in the blood-bought body, the church. No one can be forgiven (and thereby saved) outside of the church. This being true, it is impossible to overestimate the value of the church in the plan of God’s saving of mankind. How then did/does/will the church carry out its glorious mission?

The Lord’s Church Must Recognize The Value Of Souls

The very fact that God made man in His image (Gen. 1:27) should indicate some worth in connection with man’s soul. Paul used this same reasoning among the Greeks in Athens: “For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring” (Acts 17:28). One of the lessons people need to hear today is that they are valuable. Far too many grope in the darkness of despair due to an under-inflated view of themselves. We are not “hairless monkeys,” the product of organic evolution, but rather the sons and daughters of God, created in His image.

The easiest way to determine the value of the human soul is to notice, first, that Jesus taught the worth of one soul is more than the combined wealth of the world (Matt. 16:26). And second, take account of the price paid for the salvation of human souls. Once man sinned, God began to implement His plan for restoring the pinnacle of His creative work. As early as Genesis 3:15 (immediately

following the fall), God began to speak to mankind prophesying the need for and the coming of a savior.

For some four thousand years God stressed to man the wickedness of sin and the futility of human attempts to remove it. He selected and sustained the Jewish nation and implemented a sacrificial system to impress man with the consequences of sin. However, this system could not actually remit sins. Hebrews 10:4 points out, "For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins." This being the case, God gave His only begotten Son (John 3:16) to die that we might have hope of life everlasting. Galatians 1:4 relates, "Who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father." The price that was paid for each of us was the death of the very Son of God. No greater gift could be given. Think of the love God has for us that He would let His Son die in our stead.

In speaking of the price paid, the apostle Peter said:

Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot (1 Pet. 1:18-19).

Paul adds, "For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Cor. 6:20). The value of human souls is one of the great motivations for the church to carry out her mission of seeking and saving the lost.

The Lord's Church Must Recognize The Need To Save Souls

The greatest problem the world must face is its sin problem. Once God's law was violated in the garden, sin

entered the world, and all mankind must struggle with it (Rom. 5:12). In Romans 3:23, Paul affirms, "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." This verse makes it clear that all men will eventually commit sin. This verse is not affirming that we inherit sin. Ezekiel 18:20 states:

The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him.

We are responsible for our own actions, not those of our predecessors or our descendants. 1 John 1:8-10 adds:

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

These verses make it abundantly clear that we have all sinned. In fact, most rational people do not have to be told that they have done wrong; they already know. Romans 6:23 tells us, "For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Since we have all sinned, and since sinners are destined to die (spiritual death), then all men (without Jesus) are going to perish eternally (Matt. 25:41,46). This knowledge should motivate us all to zealously and consistently strive to evangelize the lost. Taking God's saving Word to the masses should be the most important objective in our lives.

The Lord's Church Must Recognize That God Desires All Men To Be Saved

This much should already be evident to the reader. God's justice demanded that the wages of sin (death) be carried out, yet His love, grace, and mercy moved Him to allow His Son to die in our place. John the Immerser recognized this fact and, upon seeing Jesus, testified of Him, saying, "...Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Paul would add, "For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:3-4). And the Spirit through Peter affirmed, "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9). The mere fact that our heavenly Father desires to have all men be saved, should move us to reach out to the lost. There is no joy in heaven over one lost soul (Luke 15:10).

The Lord's Church Must Recognize The Gospel As God's Only Saving Power

Millions of dollars and countless hours have been spent in trying to come up with a way to "reach" people and fill church buildings. Gimmicks, gadgets, games, and grand dramatic presentations have been sponsored, yet sin remains. We need to once again stand up and speak with one voice of the saving power of the Word of God. Paul understood this concept:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith (Rom. 1:16-17).

The Greek word for power is *dunamis*, from which we get our English word “dynamite.” The written Word of God is mightier than humans can comprehend. The Hebrews writer says:

For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart (Heb. 4:12).

This Word will cut the heart of the honest seeker of truth and lead him/her to the way that leads to life. In Acts 20:32 Paul reiterates:

And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified.

The Word of God, and it alone, can build us up and secure us a place in heaven.

This Gospel is strong enough to save everyone; Jew or Gentile, it matters not. All men are accountable to His majestic Word. Jesus said:

He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day (John 12:48).

Men may ignore it, mock it, and ridicule it, but, nonetheless, the Bible will judge us all one day. Paul reaffirms this in Romans 2:16: “In the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel.”

Only the Gospel can save (1 Cor. 15:1-2; Rom. 10:13-17). The church must once again recognize the power of the Gospel and declare it in its purity and simplicity to a lost and dying world.

The Lord's Church Must Recognize Itself As The Upholder Of Truth

One of the constants found in the New Testament is the idea of the church being the defender of the Truth. In 1 Timothy 3:14-15, Paul taught:

These things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly: But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.

The church is “the pillar and the ground of the truth.” It is our obligation, yea privilege, to be the great defender of the Truth on earth. In Jude 3, we are told to contend earnestly for the faith. Far too many congregations, and individual members of the Lord's body, have completely abandoned the idea of fighting for and upholding the message of the Messiah.

It is sad indeed to hear members say things like, “We don't have to defend the Gospel,” or, “Let's just hold up Jesus, and not the church.” These types of statements indicate a complete ignorance or lack of concern for the mission of the church in the area of recognizing and defending the Lord's precious precepts. If the church will not uphold the Truth, who will? No one else can. We should be honored that God has entrusted us with the soul-saving message. Jesus called us the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13,16). Paul spoke of

us having the “treasure,” the Word, in earthen vessels. If we do not take the message to the lost, no one will.

Therefore, The Mission Of The Church Past, Present, And Future Is The Salvation Of Souls

Consider what the above passages have proven: (1) souls are valuable; (2) these souls need salvation; (3) God wants them all to be saved; (4) the Gospel is the only power to save them; (5) the church is the pillar and ground of the Gospel—**therefore, it is the mission of the church to save the souls of men**, the souls of all men, our own included. We should strive with every fiber of our being to save everyone we know or meet.

This work is not committed only to preachers, elders and Bible class teachers, but to each and every individual member; not to just the first century church, but to every congregation of every century and every generation. Each individual member should utilize every talent and opportunity that comes his or her way in carrying out the mission of the church.

The church is authorized to be involved in three basic areas in accomplishing its work. The first is evangelism, or carrying the Gospel to the world. In 2 Timothy 4:2 we read, “Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.” We are to preach and teach when the world wishes to hear it as well as when they do not. The great commission of Matthew 28:18-20 says:

And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying,
All power is given unto me in heaven and in
earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father, and
of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them

to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

These are the marching orders we have been given by our Master and King. We cannot be honorable servants of Jesus and ignore what He clearly says in this passage.

The Church is also authorized to work in the area of edification, building up fellow members of the body. This is accomplished in a number of ways including (but not limited to) the worship services and joint Bible studies. 1 Thessalonians 5:11 says, "Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do." In Romans 14:19, Paul adds, "Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another." Perhaps no area in our lives can be improved more than that of being aware of the need to edify each other and then doing it. Many struggle in the church and are never extended a hand of help. Many new converts "fall through the cracks" because no one ever takes the time to teach them and encourage them in living the Christian life. Others struggle in silence when their brethren should be perceptible enough to recognize a need for some encouragement. We should be mindful of each other and aid one another in the bearing of the burdens of life. We should do unto others as we would have them do unto us (Matt. 7:12).

The third and final area wherein the church is authorized to labor is that of benevolence, or helping the needy and less fortunate. In Galatians 6:10 Paul writes: "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith." We are to be mindful of the physical problems of our fellow humans and extend to them all that we can to make sure they have the necessities of life. Most

congregations are involved in varying degrees in the helping of orphans, and some are active in offering help to the homeless in the larger cities of our land. We should be mindful of those hurt and destitute by nature or manmade catastrophes. The work of the church really is not three different items but simply one—saving the souls of men. This is done in three different ways.

Our mission is the same as the Lord's. The physician of old relates, "For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). The same commission He gave the apostles still applies today, "...unto the end of the world." This is the only reason the church exists—to get men from earth to judgment prepared to meet their God. Many have lost sight of this fact and have deluded themselves into supposing they are carrying it out, when in reality they have involved themselves in unauthorized practices.

It is not the work of the church to entertain ourselves or to offer every kind of service imaginable to allure the world. Our duty is to uphold the Gospel in the saving of the souls of men. We simply cannot afford to lose sight of this fact, for it is the very reason we exist. We need to be impressed with this fact again and passionately commit to it.

Conclusion

Thus we have seen that the church past, present and future is (was) authorized to operate only in the realm of the saving of souls. We are authorized to accomplish this purpose through (1) preaching the Gospel, (2) edifying the saints, and (3) helping the needy. We simply cannot appreciate the church fully until we understand the reason God put it on this earth. We cannot afford to lose sight of our purpose. We should be sobered and humbled by the magnitude and significance of our mission. It is by far the

most important mission and the most essential activity taking place in the world today, and we are a part of this glorious, heaven-given charge. May God help us to consider, to ponder deeply and carefully these truths and commit ourselves with renewed earnestness and enthusiasm to the mission of the church—the grand and glorious privilege of saving the souls of men.

CHAPTER 28

**The Role Of Women In
The Lord's Church:
Past, Present, Future**

Tracy Dugger

Introduction

IN *THE MARCH*, 1999 issue of **The Christian Chronicle**, the following ad was found:

YOUTH MINISTER AVAILABLE: Single female ACU graduate with BSW seeks youth ministry position. Experienced, excellent references, resume available upon request.¹

This is an example of the fruit we have born in the churches of Christ in the last twenty-five years from the influence in our society of a movement known as the feminist movement.

The Feminist Movement

The feminist movement in the United States has had a detrimental effect upon our society. No, I am not referring to gaining their right to vote in 1919 or equal-pay-for-equal work. There has been some benefit from the feminist movement. However, there have also been some damaging things: abortion rights, homosexual rights, the diminishing of the husband as the loving head of the home, and mothers being coerced out of the home to find employment in the

secular world. We have sadly witnessed in our own time, not only the breakdown of the home, but also many in the church of our Lord who have succumbed to the pressure of redefining the role of women and placing them in leadership roles.

To those who follow the feminist movement today, names like Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, Shulamith Firestone, and Patricia Ireland are common. As a study of the feminist movement reveals, these and most other feminist leaders have little respect for the Bible and for those committed to New Testament Christianity. They see the Bible as a barrier to women's freedom and the major hindrance to the cause of women's rights.

Gloria Steinem, a leading proponent of the feminist movement, said more than 25 years ago, "By the year 2000 we will raise our children to believe in human potential, not God."² She has not changed her thinking, for in 1992 she wrote a book (revealing her hatred for religion) entitled **Revolution From Within**.³

"You've come a long way baby" was a slogan used by a cigarette company appealing to women a few years ago. Yes, the women's movement has come a long way. It has even made many strides in churches of Christ. "The Lord's church is surrounded by the ever-growing pressure to conform to the Women's Liberation Movement, which is so prevalent in today's society."⁴ There are those among us today who are attempting to redefine what the Bible says about women and are demanding a wider role for them in the leadership of the church. It can be easily documented that in some churches of Christ women are heading committees on mission work,⁵ leading prayers and songs in a mixed assembly, teaching adult classes of mixed audiences, and being appointed as deacons and elders.⁶

...Kathy J. Pulley, a teacher at Southwest Missouri State University...was invited to speak

at the Christians Scholar's Conference at Pepperdine University on July 19-21, 1989. Pulley recounted her days at the Brookline, MA, congregation, where Robert Randolph preaches. She indicated that, since 1987, 'Brookline has allowed the full participation of women in every aspect of its fellowship.' She listed the various positions which had been assumed by women as follows: 'Early on, women served on the steering committee and read Scripture, later they led prayers and singing, and served communion. Finally they taught adult classes and preached.'⁷

It is clear from Scripture that God placed males in leadership positions: Jesus Christ, the Savior, was a male. The seventy, who were sent on the "limited commission," were males (Luke 10). Every New Testament Book was written by a male. The qualifications of elders forbid a woman from serving (1 Tim. 3:1-2; Tit. 1:6). And, as we shall shortly see, in Paul's first letter to Timothy, women were not to teach nor usurp authority over a man in a religious assembly (1 Tim. 2:8-13).

Lest there be some misunderstanding, these Biblical facts are not meant to demean women or hint that they have no function in the church. Women have a great work in God's kingdom—one of the greatest! In the pages of inspiration, the influence of a godly woman is emphasized over and over again (Sarah, Ruth, Deborah, Hannah, the Worthy Woman of Prov. 31, Esther, Lois, Eunice, Priscilla). What of the godly women in our own lives today? Where would we be without their humble service and example? If it were not for the work of women in the church today, very little actual work would be done in our congregations. Consider for a moment the work they do:

1. Prepare food for shut-ins, the sick, and for families when death has occurred.
2. Visit and provide comfort to the sick at home, in the hospital, and in nursing homes.
3. Provide reliable and continual financial contributions to help carry on the work
4. Donate hours in working in the church office, cleaning the building, caring for communion, landscaping, clothing rooms, resource rooms.
5. Taking members to the doctor, hospital, or grocery store.
6. Teaching in the Bible class. The greater portion of our children would go untaught in Bible School were it not for ladies.
7. Usually, it is the ladies who think to write letters of encouragement and to send birthday cards, get well cards, and sympathy cards—sentiments which mean much.
8. Send out Bible correspondence courses, participate in personal evangelism.

Women have been very helpful to Gospel preachers throughout the years. In Philippians 4:3, Paul stated, “And I intreat thee also, true yokefellow, help those women which laboured with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and with other my fellowlabourers, whose names are in the book of life.” Even though they labored with Paul in the Gospel, they did not publicly preach the Gospel. However, there were many things they could have done. They, along with their spouses, could have privately taught, like Priscilla (Acts 18:26). They could have provided food, washed clothing, and provided, along with their husbands, a place for Paul and other preachers to stay. They could

have offered encouraging words to these men in their efforts to preach the Gospel. As has been the case in our own time, they could have taken care of young children so their parents could better listen to the preaching of the Gospel. The list is endless. Simply, they did whatever they could to further the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

One sister in Christ wrote the following words:

The time has come to stop looking at those things women cannot do and emphasize instead those areas in which she can serve. The church must provide manifold opportunities for women to use the talents God has given them to His glory. I believe when this happens, not only will Christian women grow, but the church will as well.

Inferior?

Some contend that forbidding a woman to serve as elder or to preach is to classify her as an inferior person and thus to discriminate against her. This is false! Submission may indicate inferiority in some contexts, but not from the Divine viewpoint. There is nothing **evil** about being in subjection. Consider the following Biblical examples:

1. *The passage in Romans 13:1-7, enjoin upon us our obligation to render obedience to civil government.* Does the fact that we, as citizens, must be submissive to the governing authorities mean we are inferior beings? Certainly not!

2. *We learn from Ephesians 6:1-4 that children are to be subject to their parents.* Again, does this mean children are inferior creatures to their parents?

3. *In the church of our Lord, elders are said to be men who have met certain qualifications* (1 Tim. 3; Tit. 1). These men are to oversee the local work, being

executors of the chief shepherd's commands (1 Pet. 5). Each member of that local congregation is to submit in obedience to their rule (Heb. 13:17; Acts 20:28). Our submission to them does not mean we are inferior!

4. *Scripture tells us that Jesus Christ was a servant of God* (Isa. 53:11; Matt. 12:18; Phil. 2:7). He was also a Son (John 3:16; Heb. 5:8). He accepted limitation and restriction. He submitted Himself to the Father, learning obedience (Heb. 5:8-9). Now, the same questions are asked. Does the fact the Christ was subject to the Father make Him any less Deity? Is Jesus Christ inferior to the Father because He submitted to the Father's Will?

Paul explained, "But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God." (1 Cor. 11:3). Do we think less of Christ because He is submissive? Both the Father and the Son are members of the Godhead and thus equal in nature, but not in authority. Likewise, all members of the human race are equal in their nature as humans and spiritual beings, but not in authority. Just because a woman is not qualified to serve as an elder or preacher does not make her some kind of a lower creature. Jesus and Paul were not qualified to serve as elders, but this does not indicate inferiority. Did the fact that Christ was not qualified to serve as priest on earth under the Law make Him inferior (Heb. 7:14)?

Recall that in the Beginning (Gen. 1-2), man was incomplete. He was unable to fulfill the plans and purposes God had for him. This is why He gave him a "help-meet" (Gen. 2:20). This means that Eve was to be a helper, not a hinderer; a completer, not a competitor. There are obvious differences between male and female. These differences do not diminish the worth or glory of either man or woman. One such difference is seen in the Beginning when man was created first and given the leadership (Gen. 2:7; 1

Tim. 2:13). This arrangement in no way detracts from the glory of woman!

Some would contend that Paul's discussion of the woman's subjection to her husband in the home in Ephesians 5:24-33 degrades her, when, in fact, just the opposite is true! The practice of the principles found in Ephesians 5 (as well as many other Scriptures) makes for an orderly, mutual relationship between the two, as well as being greatly beneficial to society. "Many men around the world look upon women as somewhat beneath men as to how they should be treated."⁸ Past history shows that women have been treated in a terrible fashion. The 6th century **Council of Macon** held a serious debate over the question: "Does the human female possess a soul?"⁹ However, God, in His Holy Word, elevates women to a lofty position of glory and honor, thus forbidding any mistreatment from men and protecting her both physically and spiritually.

We clearly recognize that women are endowed with special qualities of love and nurture. They have a nature of tenderness and personal warmth about them. They tend to be more compassionate and emotional. Do not under-emphasize the value of these traits, for they make for a wonderful creature. These attributes are not only witnessed in our everyday lives, but the Scriptures assume the point (1 Thess. 2:7; 2 Sam. 1:26).

The Bible points out that God's estimation of a godly woman is that of a "great price" (1 Pet. 3:4). Solomon sagely states, "Who can find a virtuous wife? For her worth is far above rubies" (Prov. 31:10). We have only touched the "hem" of the proverbial garment. Certainly we could agree that the Bible elevates and protects women.

Instead of accepting what God in His Word sets out, some have turned on the actual Bible writers. Paul has been accused of being a "narrow-minded male" and a "male

chauvinist pig.” This is shocking to those who revere the Word of God. Paul was not merely speaking his own feelings or opinions. He stated in 1 Timothy 2:7, “Whereunto I am ordained a preacher, and an apostle, (I speak the truth in Christ, and lie not;) a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and verity.” Thus, being an apostle and preacher of Jesus Christ, he spoke the “truth in Christ.”

There are numerous passages dealing with the role of women in the church. As a result of space and time restraints we will primarily give attention to 1 Timothy 2.

In eight verses of First Timothy (2:8-15), Paul deals with men and women in worship. This section can be divided up into two main points: (1) **the conduct of men** (v. 8) and (2) **the conduct of women** (vv. 9-15).

Conduct Of Men (1 Tim. 2:8)

In verse 8, the inspired apostle writes, “I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting.” The word “men” in this passage is a different word in the original Greek text than is found in verses 1, 4, and 5. The word “men” in verses 1, 4, and 5 is a general word referring to mankind in general. It is a word inclusive of both men and women. However, “men” in verse 8 is much more specific in that it refers to males only.¹⁰ The same distinction can be observed in 1 Corinthians 11:3, 4, and 8. The point is that, in 1 Timothy 2:8, Paul is making a distinction between males and females.

To then admonish these males to “pray every where” is to refer to such practices in public places. In public places of assembly, the males were to lead in prayer, not the women. This becomes even clearer when examining verses 11 and 12.

“(L)ifting up holy hands” was a custom of ancient times. We today might fold our hands in prayer. In our time, folding the hands is a symbol of folding up and putting away all that our hands are busy with in life so that none of these things distract our thoughts while we pray.

The practice of “lifting up the hands” can be observed in many passages. When Solomon prayed at the dedication of the temple, the Bible says, “And Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the congregation of Israel, and spread forth his hands toward heaven” (1 Kings 8:22). The Psalmist wrote, “Thus will I bless thee while I live: I will lift up my hands in thy name” (Psm. 63:4). Thus, this custom seems to express the reverence, as well as the humility, of the worshiper. God is always above us—on a higher plane, superior.

These hands that were lifted up, Paul says, were to be “holy.” This has reference to one’s attitude. The inner man was to be faithful, pure, and undefiled by sin.

These prayers which the men were to offer in public were to be accomplished “without wrath and doubting.” This also speaks to the attitude of the one who offers the prayer. He is not to have anger (“wrath”) in his heart toward others (Eph. 4:31-32; Col. 3:8; Matt. 18:35). His prayer is to be offered in faith, not doubt. The basic idea of “doubting” seems to be skepticism. These men are to pray, believing that God will answer. They were to be optimistic in their prayers (Jas. 1:5-8; 1 John 5:14).

This passage (1 Tim. 2:8) does not prohibit women from praying. However, it does exclude them from leading the prayer in public places where men are present.

Paul first deals with the proper conduct of men in the public assembly. In the next section he will deal with the proper conduct of the women by discussing their apparel, position, and reasons for such.

Conduct Of Women (1 Tim. 2:9-15)

The Adornment Of Women (vv. 9-10)

In verse 8, Paul dealt with the work of the man. Now, in verses 9-10, Paul adds that women must not dress in such a way that becomes ungodliness:

In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array; But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works.

Simply, the clothing that a woman wears can be wrong. Paul warns against this by commanding the women to wear attire meeting three qualifications: modest (well-arranged, seemingly),¹¹ with shamefacedness (having a sense of shame),¹² and with sobriety (good judgment, moderation, self-control; especially as a feminine virtue; decency,¹³ inner self government with its constant reign on all passions and desires).¹⁴

This passage teaches that a woman will not dress in such a way as to cause lust in a man. She will not adorn herself to allure a man who is not her husband. Instead, she will dress in a well-arranged manner, with decency and purity.

Paul continues by stating, "not with broided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array." The reference here to braided hair, ornaments, and expensive clothing simply means that women are to be moderate and reserved in the clothing they wear. It is opposed to the disposition of being preoccupied or obsessed with make-up, jewelry, and lavish clothing. Specifically, this passage deals with public worship. Worship is not to be a fashion show. To draw

attention away from God and to oneself is not in accordance with proper worship.

In verse 10, Paul wants women to realize that in contrast to emphasizing the physical, women are to dress themselves in good works. Before we leave this section, let us consider a parallel passage in 1 Peter 3:3-4:

Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; But let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price.

The questions are sometimes asked: “Do these verses prohibit women from looking beautiful and being concerned about one’s outward appearance? Do these verses prohibit the wearing of jewelry and braiding the hair?” No, the Holy Spirit, through these inspired men, is trying to get women to regard such outward adorning as secondary and trivial compared to the inner adornment of character (which is exhibited in the meek and quiet spirit). In 1 Peter 3:4, Peter is not telling women to neglect their outward appearance. He is telling them not to let the outward be the primary thing. He is forbidding a lavish display of gaudiness that contributes to the vanity of those who dress in such manner.

There is nothing inherently wrong with fine clothing (Prov. 31:21-24), beauty (1 Pet. 3:5-6; Gen. 12:11,14), or riches (Gen. 13:2). If we were to take 1 Timothy 2:9 and 1 Peter 3:3-4 literally, and without qualification, then braiding the hair, wearing any jewelry, **and** putting on any apparel would be forbidden. If we are going to take the first two literally and without qualification, then we must take the third in the same way. John 6:27 is an

example of a verse that is similar in structure: "Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him hath God the Father sealed." This verse, taken literally and without qualification, forbids one to work for his daily bread. However, this interpretation would oppose Biblical teaching in other passages (2 Thess. 3:10; 1 Tim. 5:8). Again, the point of these passages is that women are not to place their chief emphasis on material things, but rather are to give greater attention to eternal life.

The Position Of Women (vv. 11-15)

Paul issues two charges to women in verses 11-12. First, he charges them to learn in quietness, "Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection" (v. 11). The term "silence" does not mean absolute silence, but rather quietness (ASV), restfulness, gentleness, or peacefulness. It is speaking of a disposition of submission regarding the manner of the woman's learning. If the word meant she was not permitted to utter a sound, she could not sing (Col. 3:16) or make the good confession (Rom. 10:10).

The second charge issued by Paul is that women are not to have dominion over the men, "But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence" (v. 12). This is in the context of religious truth (1 Tim. 2:4,7). Remember, we are dealing with the public assembly and not private relationships or settings.

Women are not prohibited from teaching altogether. In Titus 2:3-5, we learn that the older women were to teach younger women. In 2 Timothy 1:5, we learn of the teaching practices of Lois and Eunice toward Timothy. The point Paul is making is that women are prohibited from teaching (or in any other way exercising authority) over the man. Any type of leadership act or teaching done over the man

is what is prohibited. All teaching is not forbidden for her—only that which she may do “over” the man. The phrase “to usurp” is easier understood as “to have” (as the NKJV and ASV so translate).

We are told that these passages and others like them have no application to us today because we live in a different culture than those whom New Testament writers addressed.¹⁵ The inspired apostle does provide us reasons for the subordination of women in verses 13-14. Let us notice if culture was one of those reasons.

The first inspired reason is found in verse 13, “For Adam was first formed, then Eve.” The order in which God created man and woman in the Beginning (Gen. 1-2) determines the relationship God intended and the order of authority. The male was created in the Beginning to exercise headship. This order of creation dictated the order in public worship. God’s plan from Eden was patriarchal not matriarchal (Gen. 3:16).

The second reason for the order of authority is woman’s deception: “And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression” (v. 14). Scripture informs us that Eve was the first to violate the headship order. Eve acted out of harmony with God’s arrangement of headship. She took the lead in partaking of the fruit and getting her husband to do likewise. Being deceived, she violated God’s order of authority.

Do not miss this point: **God doesn’t tie woman’s subjection to the man to culture, but to creation!** There is a permanent principle here being appealed to! This is exactly what Paul does in 1 Corinthians 14:34: “Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law.” What law is he speaking here of? The law of creation (Gen. 3:16)!

Given the woman's deception and transgression, how can she be saved? Paul ends this section by answering that very question, "Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety" (v. 15). How can the woman be saved or preserved from the transgression of verse 14? Through childbearing and rearing children (v. 15). This is her role when she finds herself in this situation. Her primary role is domestic situations. Instead of seeking the leadership over the man in the home or in the church, she should seek the role God has given her. There are no greater teachers than mothers, and there is no greater work than training children!

Really, Paul is saying two things in 1 Timothy 2:8-15: (1) I want men to worship by providing holy leadership in prayer. (2) I want women to worship by dressing modestly and being in subjection. The vital question for the church is, "Will we be satisfied with God's arrangement?" Far too many are not satisfied with what God has stated in His Word. However, we must "let God be true, but every man a liar" (Rom. 3:4).

Relevancy

Do these passages have any relevance for us today? We might as well ask if the Bible itself has relevance for man in the 21st century, for it is the same question. Many hold that Truth and the message of Christianity change or evolve as time goes forward. Thus truth is not absolute, given, or permanent, but subject to change and development through history.¹⁶ These misguided ideas are even shared by some of our own brethren who would tell us that what was good for the first century man is not necessarily good for us today. They would ask, "What would the apostle Paul have to tell a 21st century NASA scientist?" They would further contend that God's Word is not relevant

to us today because of the change in society's needs and that we must change the message to meet those needs. This ideology is, of course, the devil's lie!

We strongly contend that the Bible is our “never-changing” standard for today's modern era. Just because society has changed its standards does not mean our Creator has. When we read the list of sins in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, we learn that the standard of the society in first century Corinth did not change God's standard, nor does it today. God's Word is relevant to the 21st century:

The Bible does not change from generation to generation, from culture to culture...It means today exactly what it meant when the original autographs came from the pens of the apostles and prophets, and the message is the same for all.¹⁷

Bible faith comes one way and one way only—through the use of God's Word (Rom. 10:17). If what constitutes saving Bible faith is no longer found in the Bible, then it is hopeless at best to expect to obtain it; we are left to determine the way ourselves, or we must rely upon the subjective musings of others.

We would ask, why is the Bible not relevant for today? Name one thing that makes it irrelevant. What problem does the Bible not address in principle? God, through the Bible, has anticipated the needs of every century. Could not God, who foresaw the future as though it was history, also foresee the troubled conditions of our time? Could He not foresee man's needs today and record the answers for us? Has man changed? Has his nature altered? No, man has not changed! He does the same things he has always done. Murder is still murder, lying is still lying. God expects today what He expected then! Did something occur in

history that diminished the need of man needing a Savior for redemption today? That NASA scientist needs a Savior as much as the slave of the first century. The Word of God is living and powerful for all ages (Heb. 4:12). It is relevant to today's society. It is exactly what society needs today!

Peter wrote, "The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you" (1 Pet. 1:24-25). One of the many things we can learn from these verses is that the Gospel does not lose its effectiveness and practical application with the passing of time. This is why Paul could write about the relevancy of the church by stating, "Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen" (Eph. 3:21).

When we apply what Paul wrote in First Timothy, we learn that, in a worship/church setting, women are not to have authority/dominion over the man. This prohibits a woman from **leading** a prayer in the public assembly. Leading prayer is an authoritative act because she is leading others in that prayer. Those who are silently praying are made subject to the one doing the leading. Other prohibitions include leading singing, making announcements, assisting in the Lord's Supper, serving as elders, and obviously teaching and preaching in a mixed assembly. Simply, any leadership activity or authority position over the man and within the public assembly is prohibited.

We are not against women imparting information to men [Samaritan Woman (John 4); Priscilla, who participated in the teaching of Apollos along with her husband, Aquila (Acts 18)]. We do not believe the Bible forbids asking questions, making comments, or reading Scripture in a Bible class as long as the teacher maintains the position of authority. This of course can be abused; a

woman can disrupt and take over the class being taught by a man; she can cease to learn in quietness and subjection (1 Tim. 2:11-12).¹⁸

It has never been the will of God for women to be in the forefront in public worship. Thus, we are not surprised at the contents found in 1 Timothy 2:8-15. Neither in the Old nor the New Testaments can one find a single reference to any woman's ever having a leading role of any sort of public worship. Does this mean that these women did not engage in worship to God? Did they worship God? Sure they did! But they worshiped at those altars built by their husbands and worshiped under the guidance and leadership of their husbands as their husbands offered sacrifices.

Recall that in Exodus 28:1, regarding worship, God did not say, "Take Miriam thy sister," or "Take Aaron and his daughters." He did say:

And take thou unto thee Aaron thy brother, and his sons with him, from among the children of Israel, that he may minister unto me in the priest's office, even Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron's sons.

When the Jews returned from captivity back to Jerusalem, both men and women were present in the assembly worshiping God when Ezra, the priest, read the Law (Neh. 8). These women did worship and were as much a part of the assembly as the men, but they did not take a leading part.

We find the same in the New Testament. In choosing the apostles, Jesus selected twelve men who would be the leaders of the church. In Acts 1, when a replacement was sought for Judas, this would have been a great time to show the world that God allows women in leadership roles, but God replaced Judas with Matthias, a male. When the

time came to select the apostle to the Gentiles, who was chosen? Not a woman, but a male—Paul!

In Acts 16, when Paul and his company went to Philippi they found a faithful Jewish female, Lydia, who was meeting for worship with other women. These women were worshipping God, but you cannot read where they were leading worship when men were present. Or, what of the many New Testament women who prophesied (1 Cor. 11:5; Acts 2:17-18; 21:8-9)? Nothing in Sacred Writ indicates that any of these women ever took a leading part in public worship where men were present.

The Work Of Women In The Church

In New Testament times, the labors of women were extremely important. Their special abilities to nurture, their sweet kindness, compassion, and their humble attitude of service are all seen to have been vital in the beginning and growth of the early church.

Take for instance, Phoebe. Paul stated of her:

I commend unto you Phebe our sister, which is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea: That ye receive her in the Lord, as becometh saints, and that ye assist her in whatsoever business she hath need of you: for she hath been a succourer of many, and of myself also (Rom. 16:1-2).

She was not a member of the church at Rome, but in Cenchrea. There she served with great distinction, somehow impacting the church at Rome. She was commended for her help and assistance to Paul that he might be able to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ to lost souls. She was classified by inspiration as a “servant” of the church. She, in humble disposition, bowed her will to the will of God, serving the needs of others that the Cause

might be furthered. Another word is also used to describe her character and activity, the word “succourer.” Vines says, “It is a word of dignity, evidently chosen instead of others which might have been used, and indicates the high esteem with which she was regarded, as one who had been a protectress of many.”¹⁹ Thayer says of this word, “a female guardian, protectress, patroness, caring for the affairs of others and aiding them with her resources.”²⁰ These two words (“servant” and “succourer”) speak volumes of her work in the church.

Paul spoke of two women in the church at Philippi (Phil. 4:2-3), Euodia and Syntyche, who had urgently labored with Paul and Clement. They were not idle pew-warmers, but involved servants of the church.

In 1 Timothy 5, Paul discusses a special group of widows who were now being taken care of by the church but who had been known for their good works (hospitable to strangers, washing of saints’ feet, help the afflicted). These women had rendered valuable service to the church, and now they needed help.

Tabitha (Dorcas) was a woman well reported of in the church in Joppa. The Bible says, “(T)his woman was full of good works and almsdeeds which she did” (Acts 9:36b). What greater statement in God’s service can be made? She was evidently well-off financially, being able to help with alms. She used her abilities and blessings to the fullest for service to others for the glory of God (Matt. 5:16). Further evidence of her good works was her service to God with her needle; she provided clothing (garments and coats) for the needy. She made these with her own hands.

It is clear that women are better-fitted to do many things than are men. They generally have a greater “bedside manner.” They are tuned to the “little things” which really make a difference. They are thoughtful at the plight of others. They have an amazing ability to teach children. In fact, Titus 2:3-5 speaks of their training and teaching role.

Only eternity will tell of the lasting work of women in teaching, nurturing, visiting, standing for the Truth and opposing error, admonishing, encouraging, correcting, serving, cleaning, cooking, and influencing others for the Cause of Jesus Christ. They have truly let their light shine before the world that their good works can be seen for the purpose of glorifying our Father in heaven (Matt. 5:16)!

Conclusion

In a climate when it is not popular or “politically correct” to abide by the principles of God’s Word, we must remain loyal to Christ. Many are seeking new and different roads. We must remain on the “strait and narrow” way (Matt. 7:13-14) and “ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein,” that we might find rest for our souls (Jer. 6:16). The Omniscient Creator of males and females knows what is best for marriages, societies, and churches: “Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?” (Rom. 9:20).

Endnotes

- 1 **Firm Foundation** (March 1999), p. 26.
- 2 Winford Claiborne, “Feminism’s Influence on the Church,” **Women to the Glory of God**, 1994 Spiritual Sword Lectureship, ed. Jim Laws (Pulaski, TN: Sain Publications, 1994), p. 192.
- 3 Gloria Steinem, **Revolution From Within** (Boston: Little, Brown, 1992), as quoted by Dick Sztanyo, “An Overview of the Present Discussion: The Role of Women in the Church,” **Women to the Glory of God**, 1994 Spiritual Sword Lectureship, ed. Jim Laws, (Pulaski, TN: Sain Publications, 1994), pp. 126-127.
- 4 David Jones, “The Role of Women,” **God Hath Spoken, Affirming Truth And Reproving Error**, 1999 Memphis School of Preaching Lectureship, ed. Curtis A. Cates (Pulaski, TN: Sain Publications, 1999), p. 538.

5 While working with the church in Cloverdale, Va., the author received the bulletin from a congregation in Roanoke, Va. which expressed this practice.

6 Dave Miller's work **Piloting the Strait**, Goebel Music's **Behold The Pattern**, as well as the 1990 Freed-Hardeman University's Preacher's Forum, in which the author was present, are among the multitude of resources available which well document such innovations in the church.

7 Sztanyo, pp. 126-127.

8 Thomas B. Warren, "Jesus, the Master Teacher of the Ages," **Great Lessons from New Testament Characters**, 1991 Memphis School of Preaching Lectureship (Austin: Firm Foundation, 1991), p. 25.

9 Baxter Batsell Barrett, "Christian Women Face Spiritual and Cultural Crises," Freed-Hardeman College Lectureship (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1977).

10 R. C. H. Lenski, **The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon** (Columbus, OH: The Wartburg Press, 1946), pp. 554-555.

11 Joseph Henry Thayer, **The New Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament** (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1981), p. 356.

12 W. E. Vine, **An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words** (Nashville: Nelson Publishers), p. 1040.

13 Walter Bauer, **A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature**, 2d ed., revised by William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago, 1979), p. 802.

14 Vine, p. 1067.

15 Terry M. Hightower, "Culture and Abiding Truth," **Women to the Glory of God**, ed. Jim Laws, 1994 Spiritual Sword Lectureship, (Pulaski, TN: Sain Publications, 1994), pp. 185-186.

16 This is the thinking of Dr. Thor Hall. Hall is the author of **The Christology of Christ**, written in 1982. The author used to have a copy of this book and transcribed several quotes for class work. Hall was a professor of Religious Studies

at the University of Chattanooga at the time of the writing of his book.

17 J. K Gossett, "Truth Absolute, Knowable, Do-Able," **God Hath Spoken, Affirming Truth And Reproving Error**, Memphis School of Preaching Lectureship, ed. Curtis A. Cates (Pulaski, TN: Sain Publications, 1999), p. 98.

18 Frank Young, "Men and Women in Public Worship," **Studies in Timothy and Titus**, ed. David L. Lipe (Knoxville, TN: East Tennessee School of Preaching and Missions, 1986), p. 59.

19 Vine, p. 1111.

20 Thayer, p. 549.

CHAPTER 29

**Discipline In The
Lord's Church:
Past, Present, Future**

Glenn Colley

Introduction

WHAT A SIGNAL HONOR to be invited to speak on the great **POWER** lectureship and to be associated with B. J. Clarke and the fine brethren of the Southaven church of Christ.

“Church Discipline” is often a term used to describe the withdrawal of fellowship, but they are not necessarily synonymous terms. First, withdrawal is never called church discipline in the Bible, and, second, discipline is much broader than just the withdrawal of fellowship. Webster’s **Student Dictionary** defines “discipline” well with these words: “Training which corrects, molds, strengthens, or perfects. Punishment; chastisement.” Then the fourth definition listed: “The system of rules affecting conduct or action; esp., the rules or laws affecting the religious practices of a church or the conduct of its members.” Discipline would include withdrawal when it is necessary, but it certainly does not begin there. It begins with training children (when they are small) about Jesus and His church! It includes all those teenage and young adult classes in which lively discussions settle finally into the teacher’s clear, scriptural answers. It includes the

shepherds, or elders of the flock, meeting church members in their homes and after the worship assembly, exhorting and encouraging Christians not to grow weary in well doing. And yes, it also includes the sad and difficult task of withdrawing ourselves from the impenitent.

There are actually five ways the Lord disciplines and chastens His children today: First, through Gospel preaching which “reproves, rebukes, and exhorts” (2 Tim. 4:2). Second, through allowing us to suffer the consequences of our sins (1 Pet. 4:15-16). Third, through common suffering which is the common fate of humanity (1:6-7). Fourth, through our consciences (Rom. 2:15). Fifth, through the withdrawal of fellowship (2 Thess. 3:6).

We must define church discipline with love. Without Biblical discipline a church really does not have the kind of love it needs—the kind which wants the best and trusts the Lord. What would you say of parents who claimed to love their children but who did not discipline them—did not teach them how to act, how to share, how to help, how to work? Suppose they never corrected them when they misbehaved? It is either because they do not love their children, or are ignorant about how to show love. So it is in the church family. 1 Peter 5:1-2 says that the elders of the church are to “feed the church and take the oversight thereof.” That describes discipline. A church without Biblical discipline is a church without real love.

Now, having said that, this lecture has its scope narrowed to the subject of withdrawing from the impenitent.

Because of the autonomy of the church, it is difficult even to guess how churches of Christ have done in reference to withdrawal over the last several hundred years. Yet, any one of us who travels very much know that the practice has largely been abandoned among the churches today. In the last five years, have you seen an

impenitent brother or sister withdrawn from? Do you know of five churches who practice this? Some have quit withdrawing from lost members because they do not believe the Bible teaching on the matter applies today. Others believe it applies today but simply lack the courage to act. Let us now take a look at some key passages. These verses clearly and firmly express God's will in the matter, and should be carefully observed and heeded.

Bear in mind as we examine these verses that the withdrawal of fellowship is done by the whole church in reference to a fellow church member who is in sin and refuses to repent. Time and multiple encouragements have been used and exhausted. Countless prayers have been offered. The offending member refuses to repent. Observe that the withdrawal is shocking! It is meant to be. Done according to the Scriptures, it declares this soul to be lost. But note: the withdrawal does not make the brother or sister lost. They are already lost because of their sin. The withdrawal only declares what is already true. That is why refusal to withdraw when the time is right is so insidious and dangerous. That lost brother or sister may believe that they are still in a saved condition, and their fellow Christians pretend right along with them. That is not love, but an exhibition of sinful pride among our members. Furthermore, the withdrawn from member does not have one single additional thing to do to obtain forgiveness than he did before the withdrawal. The withdrawal is simply to acknowledge what is true. This brother or sister is lost because he or she persists in sin.

When the Christians in Corinth refused to practice withdrawal, Paul said it was due to their "glorying." They gloried in themselves and were puffed up (1 Cor. 5:2,6). Elders and other Christians today who refuse to withdraw as the Scripture teaches, glory in themselves and are puffed up too. Now let us read 1 Corinthians 5:1-13:

It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?

Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, neither with the leaven of malice and wickedness; but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators: Yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.

Now, pay close attention to the text. This sin was being committed by a member of the church. Paul says the fornication was “among you” (v. 1). The church was doing one thing and should have been doing another. It was a time to mourn yet they were puffed up (v. 2). Sin should have been taken away but instead was allowed to remain. The announcement of withdrawal (vv. 4-5) was to be made when the church was gathered together but was only the starting line from which the church would begin withholding their social interaction. They were not to eat with him (v. 11). They were to put away from themselves that wicked person (v. 13).

Paul did not have to tell us the reason, but he did nonetheless: First, “To deliver such an one unto Satan” (v. 5), a term meaning that the church hereby declares what is already true—this man is now lost because of his sin and refusal to repent. They do this because they want to destroy the sin in his life, and **so that “the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.”** Withdrawal is done in hopes of saving the one from whom we withdraw. Hopefully, he will be so deeply impacted by the statement of withdrawal and the grave seriousness with which his fellow Christians address him that he will finally come to grips with his sinful state and lost condition. But what if he does not?

There is a second purpose: “...a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump” (v. 6). That is, churches which fail to practice church withdrawal are opening the door to more souls being lost through negative influence. Withdrawal makes a statement to every member of the church. Sin **is** serious. Hell **is** fearsome and real. The Bible **is** true. And one more: In churches whose elders are faithful and active shepherds, Christians can feel some sense of security that they are living faithfully by the fact that the elders are not confronting them about sin gone unforgiven. If you do

not believe that failure to practice withdrawal will promote sin in a church, do not shake your fist at the preacher, but at Heaven itself, for that is the origin of this stated truth, "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump" (1 Cor. 5:6).

Withdrawal applies to fellow church members and not to the people of the world (vv. 10-13). The only way to escape sin in the world is to die and go to heaven. These teachings only apply to wayward church members.

Another key passage on the subject is 2 Thessalonians 3:6: "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us."

This is a powerful verse in the life of a true Christian for these reasons. First, it is a Bible command. Christ left us His Testament (Heb. 9:15-21), and He rules as head of the church today through that Testament. Second, it is a particularly explicit Bible command. There is no plainer command spoken in the entire New Testament. Third, this Bible command is fortified with the name of Jesus Christ. Fourth, this command comes in the same epistle and chapter which concludes with these sobering words: "And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother" (2 Thess. 3:14- 15).

Though not stated, the New Testament clearly implies that the withdrawal process should be led by the elders. They are the ones who are charged to watch for the souls of the church members (Heb. 13:17). Furthermore, for others to bypass the elders and take the lead on such a matter could not be right. The elders are the ones who are the overseers of the flock (Acts 20:28). After the elders make the decision and the announcement of withdrawal, it is the duty of the church to carry out the decision. Those

who fail to carry it out find themselves in the unhappy position of thwarting Christ's pattern and intention for His church.

Why Elders Do Not Lead The Church In Practicing Withdrawal Of Fellowship

There are a number of reasons elders will give for choosing not to withdraw from the impenitent, and yet the reasons pale beside the clear commands of 2 Thessalonians 3:6 and 1 Corinthians 5. Observe some of these reasons for not obeying this clear command:

“We cannot withdraw from someone because of sin—we all sin.” It is true that we all have sinned (Rom. 3:23) and that to deny sin is to deceive ourselves (1 John 1:8). But suggesting that fact to argue this stance misses the point. We do not withdraw from a church member because they sin, but because they refuse to repent of sin! They have abandoned their commitment to be dead to sin (Rom. 6:1-6). They have been encouraged and rebuked, but they persist in sin. That is the reason they are candidates for withdrawal. Yes, some will refuse to withdraw because they argue “we all sin.” But that is not really the reason they do not withdraw.

“We are afraid the church might rebel and people will leave for other congregations!” As a matter of fact, in churches where withdrawal has not been practiced for a number of years, chances are good that such action will offend some weaker members and they may leave. Elders who have failed to lead the church faithfully are greatly to blame for such division if it occurs. Had they been leading all along, teaching, encouraging, exhorting, rebuking, and withdrawing when necessary, such action would not be so shocking to the church. But after several years have passed and many unfaithful members have slipped away unnoticed, beginning

withdrawal proceedings will seem mean-spirited and offensive to some members.

When a church has not practiced withdrawal faithfully for some time, the elders who lead her should repent, publicly confess their wrong, and express their determination to do right in the eyes of God. Then they should proceed as fairly and equitably as they possibly can. Having said all that, however, the argument that “We are afraid the church might rebel and people will leave for other congregations” is not really the reason elders do not lead in scriptural withdrawal.

“We must grow in number! That’s our main objective. To practice withdrawal is counterproductive.” Reading 1 Corinthians 5 makes this argument seem hollow and foolhardy. What good is growth in the church if we ignore Christ’s will? Some will indeed make this argument, but you should know that this is not the real reason they do not practice scriptural withdrawal of fellowship.

“We haven’t done it in years in this church, and we don’t know where to start!” Granted, this is a thorny problem. Consistency is critical in this form of church discipline. As before stated, the first thing to do is show the church that the elders are sorry for their failure to lead faithfully in this regard. Next, the elders should decide a reasonable number of past years to review and correct, perhaps ten. Then all of those who have left the faith for false religions, worldliness, or just laziness—along with those who are still attending but are divisive for one reason or another—should be visited and exhorted to repent. There should be prayer meetings in which these people are prayed for by name. If they refuse, the names of those who refuse to return should be read publicly. The reading should be done by the shepherds in a spirit of soberness and sadness. Such an occasion, after all, is complicated by the fact that these people were not properly approached

back when they first became unfaithful. When the past has been reviewed and addressed, then the elders must be dedicated to shepherding the flock as the Lord has taught.

Yes, some will argue that they do not practice scriptural withdrawal because they have not done it in years and would not know where to start, but that is not the real reason churches do not practice scriptural withdrawal today.

“We should not withdraw from these people, for they have withdrawn themselves by quitting the church.” This seems at first to be reasonable, but it is not. It suggests that the one sin we cannot attempt to correct with withdrawal is walking away from the Lord and His church. As a matter of fact, however, this is scripturally the clearest example of the one from whom we should withdraw. Look again to 2 Thessalonians 3:6: “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us.”

According to this command, from whom are we to withdraw? “Every brother that walketh disorderly.” The original language behind this phrase is interesting and revealing. The word for “disorderly” is Strongs number 814, *ataktos*, and here are the three definitions listed by Strongs:

- 1) disorderly, out of ranks (often so of soldiers).
- 2) irregular, inordinate, immoderate pleasures.
- 3) deviating from the prescribed order or rule.

A soldier who walks out of ranks is called AWOL, absent without leave. A church member who quits walking in the “ranks” of the church family but chooses to walk

away from it is walking “disorderly” and is a candidate for church withdrawal.

One more thing: This is an interesting argument, but it is not really the reason churches do not faithfully practice scriptural withdrawal of fellowship.

The real reason churches today do not practice the withdrawal of fellowship from the impenitent as the Scripture commands is because of disbelief and lack of faith. The root problem is that elders do not have the faith that Christ knows what is best for His own church. And they do not believe strongly enough in eternity. If we could spend ten minutes in hell, we would be more serious about carrying out the Bible commands about the church. In fact, if we could spend ten minutes in heaven—in the presence of the Almighty—we would likewise become more serious. The real reason we do not obey the crystal-clear command to withdraw from the impenitent is this: weak faith.

Furthermore, we exhibit a sort of faith in ourselves. Paul called it “glorying” (1 Cor. 5:6). We would not say it, but deep inside we have decided we know better how to grow and run the church of Christ than Christ does. No one loves godly elders more than the author of this chapter, but elders whose faith is not strong enough to do what God says in this matter are contributing to a lack of faith in the members. Christians need to see in their leaders a deep seriousness about sin and its consequences. They need to see gentle, godly men who are truly concerned about their souls. It is that faith—that seriousness—that will grow a strong church of people for the Lord. Numbers? We all hope for numbers because they represent souls. Yet it is worth noting that the passages which command withdrawal do not mention numbers. We must not rebel against God's command to withdraw because of our ideas about numbers.

Brothers and sisters, the church does not belong to us. She belongs to Christ, and He bought her with His

own blood (Acts 20:28). It is no more our place to change His written will in reference to church discipline than it is to change His requirements for church admission. Ironically, we would not (and should not) think of ignoring the command in Acts 2:38: “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins....” And yet the command to withdraw is stated more strongly than that: “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us” (2 Thess. 3:6).

May God bless us all as we daily strive to please Him with our lives, and may God bless godly elders, who, though imperfect like the rest of us, have committed themselves to leading Christ’s church as He has instructed.

CHAPTER 30

**Some Popular
Misconceptions About
The Lord's Church**

Toney Smith

Introduction

THERE IS NO GREATER need today than for all of mankind to understand and to love the church of Christ. It is to be cherished and held in high regard because it is the blood-bought body of Jesus Christ (Eph. 4:4; 1:22-23; Col. 1:18,24). In Ephesians, the great church epistle, we read, "According to the eternal purpose which He purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph. 3:11). This is just one of the verses in which God speaks of His eternal purpose which He set forth for the church from the beginning of time. Before God spake into existence the universe (Gen. 1:1ff), the church was a part of His great scheme for the redemption of men.

Many prophecies were given by God as a means of introducing the Lord's church to mankind. Isaiah was chosen as God's spokesman eight centuries prior to its establishment. He described it as the "mountain of the Lord's house" (Isa. 2:2) and it was into this house that all nations would flow. It is not at all surprising then that New Testament writers would also describe the church as a mountain (Heb. 12:22) and as a house (3:6). This prophet

also spoke of the “word of the Lord” going forth from Jerusalem (Isa. 2:3), which, of course, is clearly seen in Acts chapter 2.

Closely preceding the establishment of the church in (approximately) A.D. 33, God introduced the prophet John, who worked diligently preparing the people for the coming of the Lord (Luke 1:17). His message called for repentance and baptism in water for the remission of sins (Mark 1:4; Matt. 3:2,6). John’s preaching was preparing the people for a kingdom not made with hands. He said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 4:17). At this time, the church was not yet established on the earth, yet everything that he taught pointed to the ushering in of that wonderful kingdom. John spoke of One that was coming Who would “take away the sins of the world” (John 1:29). This was the mission of Christ as He left the portals of glory to come to this earth (Luke 19:10). He came to save men from the sickness of sin. In connection with this fact, we must understand that it was the blood of Jesus that purchased the church (Acts 20:28). Without His blood being shed there would be no remission of sin (Heb. 9:22), and without being in the church of Christ there is no salvation (1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 5:23). Many are saying, “Jesus, yes—but not the church,” or, “preach Christ, not the church of Christ.” But the two cannot be separated. You cannot have Christ without having His bride.

We have observed these things in our introduction so that we might realize the importance of understanding the church. Many misconceptions abound relating to the Lord’s body. Many of these misconceptions are leading the church into apostasy and are making the church appear to be just a manmade organization existing among many others. In our study, we are going to observe some of these misconceptions. We will notice some past thoughts, the present positions, and the future ramifications of these misconceptions.

Misconceptions Of The Past

Misconceptions have abounded even from the very beginning of the Lord's church. Just before its establishment, the disciples asked in Acts 1:6: "When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom of Israel?" Their concept was that the nation of Israel would be restored. The kingdom which was to be established would be the church. In Luke 24:46-49, we read that Christ commanded the apostles to remain in Jerusalem to receive power from on high. And on that Pentecost day the Gospel was preached and souls were added to the church (Acts 2:47), not to the nation of Israel. In fact, the church was established to receive all men who would obey the Gospel (Mark 16:15-16). Even to this very day, there are those who still look to the nation of Israel as being the chosen nation of God. Many world governments, the United States included, are giving preference to Israel because of the misconception that this nation is special in the eyes of God—the very nation of people who rejected, and are still rejecting, Christ as the Messiah! This misconception has caused many problems and concerns in the religious world as well as in the political arena.

Some believe that the church of Christ is just a denomination among the many denominations of the world. They declare that one church is as good as any other. In the early church there were those who would have been happy with having two churches—one for the circumcised and one for the uncircumcised. The Jews did not want anything to do with the Gentiles. However, Scripture tells us that the wall that separated them was broken down: "For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us" (Eph. 2:14). It was never God's plan for there to be more than one church in which men would worship and find salvation.

Christ condemned division in the church but did not authorize fellowship with denominations. The misconception that there is no difference between the Lord's church and denominationalism is not only erroneous, but it is blasphemous and brings into question the justice and truth of God. Christ is the head of the church (Col. 1:18; Eph. 1:22-23), and the head commands that there be no division in the body (1 Cor. 12:25). For years there have been those who advocate the denominational concept that one church is as good as another. They cry, "Go to the church of your choice."

Today there are men in the body of Christ who are prostituting the wonderful bride of Christ by advocating this same false position. Yes, they are men who seem to have no regard for Bible truth concerning this matter! In 1986 Randy Mayeux said:

Congregations all over the country are having combined assemblies with congregations of the Independent Christian churches. A few have exchanged preachers/pulpits. Relationships are being built; though the wall has not been torn down, at least a few bridges are being constructed over it.¹

In a sermon tape dated April 2, 1995, Max Lucado made a joke of the church of Christ when he said that those in the churches of Christ think that they are the only ones on the boat going to heaven.²

Today it seems to be a popular thing to misrepresent the Bible's teaching concerning this matter. Some are saying that there is to be fellowship among the many and varied religious people who will confess Christ as being the Son of God. This mindset can only weaken and destroy what the faithful brethren down through the ages have stood for and what they knew the church of Christ is to be. Rubel Shelly said:

The church has got to change. If it doesn't change my kids are not going to stay with it. I'm probably going to stay with it—not sure...But my children won't stay in it, if it doesn't address the issues that are real in their world...They won't stay with a tired institution that calls itself the church.³

How sad it is that they will not stay in the only body authorized by our Lord and the only place wherein salvation is found! What would Mr. Shelly desire to change? I think that it is clear. He has aligned himself with denominationalism and false doctrines. He and others would carry the church into apostasy! The church must not be caught up in this ungodly position. There is only one church (Eph. 4:4; 1:22-23).

Did Alexander Campbell establish the church of Christ? This is another misconception that was started many years ago. There has not been an active member of the church of Christ who has not at some point had to answer this misconception. It began many years ago, and, in some areas of the country, members of the church are still referred to as “Campbellites.” The first person to use this term was Robert K. Owens as he debated Alexander Campbell on the existence of God.

History reveals that the movement to restore New Testament Christianity was in existence long before Mr. Campbell came to America. Historically, we know that there were a number of men who were pleading for the removal of human creeds and a return to Biblical authority in all matters of religion. Men such as James O'Kelley, Abner Jones, Barton W. Stone and others were seeking to return to the old paths. In the May 4, 1971 issue of the **Firm Foundation**, there is a picture of a marker which stands in Revere, Massachusetts. It reads: “Church of Christ, 1710, Meeting house of the church of Christ in Romney Marsh. Erected in 1710, Thomas Shieber first

settled minister, died December 27, 1749 aged 91 years.” This was many years before the birth of Alexander Campbell. It is also noted in the July 27, 1939 **Gospel Advocate** that F. B. Srygly wrote and spoke of a document which contained the minutes of a business meeting dated November 17, 1736. This congregation met at the North Yarmouth church of Christ near the present city of Celina, Tennessee. Thus it can be historically documented that the church of Christ was in existence long before Alexander Campbell came on the scene.

Mr. Campbell himself refuted this misconception. Notice his statement in the New Orleans **Commercial Bulletin** after they had identified him as a founder of the religious group:

Gentlemen, allow me to thank you for the kind and complimentary notice you gave me in your issue of the 13th instillation of my arrival in your city. I also feel very grateful to the minister and members of the Methodist church who tendered me the use of their house of worship for the Lord's day evening. And I regret that it was not in my power to accept it. You have done me gentlemen, too much honor in saying that I am the founder of a denomination quite respectable in many portions of the west known as Christians. I have always repudiated all human aids and human creeds and shall feel very grateful if you will correct the erroneous impression which your article may have made in thus representing me as the founder of a religious denomination.⁴

Some Present Misconceptions

Today there are many misconceptions about the work and mission of the church. Due to this misconception, many and varied innovations have barged

into the Lord's body. The mission of the church of Christ is to bring lost souls to salvation (Matt. 28:18-20). This end is brought about through evangelism, edification, and benevolence. The church is to convert men to Christ and His church (Mark 16:15-16); then she is to work at edifying and keeping the members faithful (Eph. 4:11-16; Gal. 6:1-2). The church also has a responsibility to the poor and needy (Jas. 1:27; Gal. 6:10).

Nothing else is to be classified as the work of the church. Several things might be recognized as being Christian in principle but yet not be authorized as the church's responsibility. Far too many are inventing things for the church to do that are not authorized by Scripture. Individual Christians can and should do certain things that are godly and good, but we must be careful never to press upon the church that which is not scripturally authorized. Some of these things may seem proper and still be improper. The home has many responsibilities. It is to raise and train the children of that home (Eph. 6:1-4). The home can provide recreational activities for its children, but the church is not to be charged in this area. We must be careful never to do things without authority, even if it seems to be right. This principle is taught in Numbers 24:13: "I cannot go beyond the commandment of the Lord, to do either good or bad of mine own mind; but what the Lord saith, that will I speak."

Let us notice some of the present-day misconceptions concerning the church's work. The church is not to provide recreational activities. God's church is not in the entertainment and recreational business. Games and entertainment of the wholesome nature are good and needed in the development of our young people. They are also needed for family togetherness as well as good fellowship. But it is not authorized as an activity of the church. Church members may plan and enjoy these

activities but it must not be classified as a work of the church. Today we see many congregations building gymnasiums, but this is not with God's approval. Entertainment is the responsibility of the home and individual Christians.

The church is a Divine, spiritual institution. It must be doing that which has been appointed by God. Our emphasis must be upon taking the saving Gospel to those who are lost (Eph. 3:10), to build up the church (1 Thess. 5:11), and to help those who are truly needy (Gal. 6:10). The church of our Lord must never be moved away from these holy, God-approved works to pursue any other activities, no matter how good or worthwhile they might be. Keep in mind that a thing can be described as Christian if it is governed by Christian principles, but nothing can be set up as the work of the church unless it is biblically authorized.

The misconception concerning the Holy Spirit is a problem today. Some men are making some very erroneous claims concerning the Holy Spirit, and it is causing a great deal of problems. For over a hundred years there has been a debate among faithful brethren concerning the indwelling of the Spirit. It was not something that was used as a test of fellowship. However, today there are those who have the Spirit working in miraculous ways. In a speech at the Nashville Jubilee, Joe Beam claimed that the Holy Spirit would tell him when a couple having marriage problems would tell a lie during their counseling session.⁵

This misconception is causing a great number of problems in the church today. There are some who do not seem to mind dividing the Lord's body. The Pentecostal movement seems to be picking up ground. The trend today is to have the Holy Spirit working in ways other than through the Word. Some feel that to affirm this (that the

Spirit indwells and directs us only through the Word) is to limit God. In today's world the human thought-range concerning the work and action of the Holy Spirit runs all the way from total ignorance as to His existence to the exaggerated claims regarding what He is now doing in the lives of individuals. To believe that the Spirit indwells every child of God does not mean that He indwells in a way other than through the Word. He is a mark or seal in the heart of Christians identifying them as being such. The fact that the Holy Spirit directs us through His Word (Rom. 1:16; 2 Thess. 2:13-14; Luke 8:11) does not destroy the truth that, as a seal and earnest, He dwells in the heart of the faithful child of God.⁶ There are far too many who are jumping on this cart filled with error and division. The Bible teaches that miracles have ended (1 Cor. 13:8-13).

Another misconception in our present day is the idea that the church and the kingdom are not the same institution. Notice what the modernists are saying. They believe that the Lord came to earth for the purpose of establishing His kingdom, but, because He was rejected by the Jews, He established the church instead. They believe that heaven was surprised at the rejection, but we know that there was no surprise because the Bible prophesied that He would be rejected (Psm. 118:22). The Scriptures are clear that He certainly did establish the kingdom (John 3:5; Col. 1:13; Rev. 1:9), which is the church (Matt. 16:18-19). This was in the mind of God from the beginning. It was in His eternal plan (Eph. 3:10-11). Colossians 1:13 shows that the kingdom has already been established: "Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son." We could not be placed into something that is not in existence.

In connection with the above misconception, there are those who believe that the Lord is returning to set up His kingdom and reign for one thousand years. This is a

misrepresentation of Revelation 20. Brother Roy H. Lanier, Sr. says of the one thousand years of Revelation 20:

[It] is that period of duration, however short or long it may be, from the binding of Satan and the coronation of Jesus on David's throne on Pentecost after the resurrection to the destruction of Satan and his followers on the day of judgment.⁷

Jesus came the first time to "seek and save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). God sent Him to save the world (John 3:16-17). But Jesus is coming the second time to judge the world and to punish those who obey not the Gospel, and are disobedient to His will. Notice 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9:

And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power.

Jesus is not coming again to reign here for a millennium. He has already established His kingdom and has reigned over it for some two thousand years. He will return, fulfilling all promises made in this connection. He is coming to raise the dead and judge all men (John 5:28-30). No, there will not be a kingdom established; rather, it will be that the Lord will judge all mankind, and some will go into eternal destruction and others into life everlasting.

Church discipline is another present-day misconception. I say misconception because I do not see it being practiced in the church today. We are woefully lacking in discipline in all phases of our lives. The government, schools, homes, and churches have flatly ignored the Bible truth concerning this important subject. Jesus said, “And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched” (Mark 9:43). Our Lord was not suggesting that one disfigure his body, but rather that everyone should discipline himself. A diseased member of the body must be cured or removed for the protection of the rest of the body. No society can prosper without proper and consistent discipline. There are many passages which relate to this commandment (Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:1-5; Matt. 18:15-17; 2 Thess. 3:6; Tit. 3:10). When a member of the church will not repent of sin, that person is to be disciplined so as to save his soul (1 Cor. 5:5), to keep the church pure (5:6), and to save our own souls by our obedience to God’s commands (2 Thess. 3:6).

Lack of discipline demonstrates a lack of love—for the sinner, for the church, and for God. Souls are going to be lost if there is not a turning back to God’s way. It will work in spite of what many are saying. When Biblical love becomes a reality, action will be taken to save souls and maintain the purity of Christ’s bride.

Today we are seeing more and more who do not respect the authority of God’s Word. This condition is brought about by the misconception that we can be ignorant of the Word and still be pleasing to God. In the church today there is less and less interest in studying the Bible. Far too many never study their Bibles. We overcome misconceptions by proper study of God’s Word (2 Tim. 2:15; 3:15-17).

To establish Biblical authority, there must be a direct statement, a command, an approved example, or a necessary inference. This is the only proper way to establish the authority of a given subject. There are many innovations that are being introduced into the Lord's church without any authority. The devil will never tire of introducing them. We are seeing congregations singing during the Lord's Supper, women leading in prayer where men are present, hand clapping, mechanical instruments of music in worship, the view that everything we do in life is worship, etc. But where do we find the authority for such? It is only found in the "I like it" realm! We do not need a "new hermeneutic"; we need to go back to a "thus saith the Lord." Men desperately need to remember

For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book (Rev. 22:18-19).

The Future Of The Church

Someone in the past asked the question, "Brethren, are we drifting?" To this we must answer that far too many are already "adrift"! There are many dangers confronting the church in the days ahead. Some things we have already mentioned, but we must emphasize the great need for all of us to "earnestly contend for the faith" (Jude 3). The future of the Lord's church must not be based upon misconceptions or outright rebellion against God's Word. The future of the Lord's church is in our hands. Let us

notice some things which we must be careful to understand.

Materialism has caused many to move away from the narrow path. The desire to update and be like everyone else will move the church away from God. Our aim must be to seek first the kingdom of God, “and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matt. 6:33). Paul wrote, “If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God” (Col. 3:1). Getting caught up in “keeping up with the Joneses” will hurt the cause of Christ. Materialism has caused many mothers to leave home and go into the work place. When this happens the home will suffer. We ought to look back to God’s Word to learn this principle concerning a mother’s role in the home: “To be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed” (Tit. 2:5).

Compromise is another avenue in which Satan brings problems into the church. Many are compromising truth so as to be popular, to be modern, to have large numbers or any number of other things. Compromising truth is to have an allegiance with the devil. Adam and Eve did this very thing in the garden. They let Satan move them from the truth. Just an added “not” to the command was fatal. My friends, our compromise of truth can and will destroy our homes, our congregations, and our lives. Just ask this question: did Noah compromise truth in Genesis 6? “Thus did Noah; according to all that God commanded him, so did he” (Gen. 6:22). This is why we read of him in Hebrews 11:7: “he became the heir of the righteousness which is by faith.”

The future of the Lord’s church must not be based upon misconceptions; rather, the church should make sure that it holds fast to the things that are written. We must

be concerned about the future of the church. Its future does not depend upon money, multitudes, or programs. The future of the church should be bright, but its brightness and success depend on each of us doing certain things.

Each of us must defend God's Word. Our cry should be as the Psalmist: "O how love I thy law" (Psm. 119:97), and "his delight is in the law of the Lord" (1:2). The church is to make sure that it supports and defends the Truth at any and all costs (1 Tim. 3:15). Can we, like Paul, say, "I am set for the defence of the gospel" (Phil. 1:17)?

Each one of us must be giving our all to win souls for Christ. The church has a bright future when we are daily teaching the Gospel (Acts 5:42). I often wonder what a community would think and say if every member were actively involved in winning souls. It would be as it was in the first century when the citizens said, "...These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also" (17:6). Somehow we have come to think that if we open the doors of the church building and advertise the times of services we are fulfilling the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). But that is far from the truth. We must turn and become busy in searching for the lost (Luke 15:3ff). The future of the church is wrapped up in the evangelistic zeal of Christians today! It is a terrible misconception to think that the preacher or elders are to do this work to the exclusion of every member. Where will the church be in fifty years if everyone worked just like me and you?

Every member is to edify one another. To edify means to build up and to encourage. I believe that our daily thoughts should be, "How can I build up my brethren?" We know that the Bible teaches that we are to let all things that we do be for the purpose of edifying

(Rom. 14:19; 1 Cor. 14:26). The future of the church would certainly be bright if we all tried to build up and never to tear down.

The future of the church is secure when everyone loves the Lord as they should: “Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind” (Matt. 22:37). There is no substitute for love. When we love God as we ought, everything else will be well. God wants all! And when our all is given, the future of the church will be bright and glorious. The song says, “We’re part of the family that’s been born again, we’re part of the family **whose love knows no end!**” There is nothing more wonderful than to see the church grow and prosper. But it all begins with me.

Conclusion

Misconceptions abound, and there will be many more added in the years to come. The church has and will be influenced by some who will not “Hold fast the form of sound words” (2 Tim. 1:13). But there are wonderful blessings to be found when the church will walk in the Truth. James tells us that every good and perfect gift comes down from God (Jas. 1:17). These blessings are available to all those within the church. Salvation in heaven awaits faithful members of the church (Eph. 5:23). Every spiritual blessing is available in Christ and in His church (1:3-7). There are many wonderful privileges of being a child of God. We have wonderful fellowship with those who walk in the light (1 John 1:7), and we are blessed with a great brotherhood of helpers.

Let us be encouraged to work hard at preserving what has been left by those of days gone by who were faithful to God. We owe them our thanks and a solemn vow to teach the next generation the importance of the

church. Let us show them how much the church means to us. Let us keep the church pure for our children, grandchildren, and to all who will follow.

May God help us to overcome the misconceptions of the past and the present, and may we never be guilty of handing down those errors in the future.

Endnotes

1 Randy Mayeux, "Needed: Champions of Unity," **Image Magazine** (1 April 1986), p. 26.

2 From a sermon tape that I have in my files. (TS)

3 From a sermon manuscript that I have in my files. (TS)

4 Alexander Campbell, **Memoirs**, II, p. 441.

5 From a tape that I have in my files. (TS)

6 Mac Deaver, "The Holy Spirit," **What Do You Know About God?**, ed. Jack H. Williams (Independence, MO: Williams Publishing, 1985), p. 158.

7 Roy H. Lanier, Sr., "Revelation 20—An Analysis and Exegesis," **Premillennialism, True Or False?**, ed. Wendell Winkler (Ft. Worth: Winkler Pub., 1978), p. 232.

CHAPTER 31

Can One Be Saved Outside Of The Lord's Church?

James Rogers

Introduction

THE RELIGIOUS WORLD IS filled with ideas as to how one is saved from sin. Most of these ideas do not include the church of Christ. Our task, in this study, is to determine if one must become a member of the church of Christ in order to be saved. In making this determination, we must use the Bible as our standard. The question really is this: does the Bible teach that one must be a member of the church in order to be saved from sin?

Men are not always wrong just because they disagree with one another on some subject. Men are not always right just because they agree with one another on some subject. Men are right or wrong as they agree or disagree with God. The Psalmist reminds us that "For ever, O Jehovah, Thy word is settled in heaven" (Psm. 119:89).¹ Jesus told the apostles, "whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16:19).

Too many believe, without adequate evidence for such belief, that one is saved as long as he is a good moral man. When one is asked what a good moral man is, the answer

usually includes such things as being a good family man, an honest dealer in business, a good neighbor, a good citizen, etc. Some would expand this to include being a member, in good standing, of some religious organization, but they would be quick to point out that being a member of such was not necessary in order for one to be saved.

Let us study carefully the Bible teaching on this subject and base our decisions on a "Thus saith the Lord."

Definition Of The Word "Church"

In order to determine if one must be a member of the church of Christ in order to be saved, one must understand what the church is. A failure to properly answer this question will lead one to draw the wrong conclusion as to the place of the church in salvation.

Let us define the word, "church," in order to have a better understanding of our subject.

The word "church" was derived from the Greek word "kuriakos." The Greeks used this word to refer to a house or a temple that was devoted to one of their gods, or to more than one of their gods. In the Greek New Testament "kuriakos" is used in passages which refer to things that pertain to, or belong to the Lord. "Kuriakon deipnon" is found in 1 Corinthians 11:20 and is translated "the Lord's supper," or "the supper that pertains to, or belongs to the Lord." "Kuriake hemera" in Revelation 1:10 is translated "the Lord's day," or "the day devoted to the Lord," or 'the day that belongs to the Lord'... "Kuriakos" came into the English language through the Teutonic or German tongue. In Anglo-Saxon (German that became Old English) "kuriakos" took the form "circe." In Middle English it became 'chirche.' In Scotch it is "kirk." In modern English it is "church."²

Jesus used a different word to talk about the church. Jesus, in Matthew 16:18, used the word *ekklesia* to talk about the church. Jesus said: "...upon this rock I will build my church":

"Ekklesia"...from "ek," out of, and "klesis," a calling ("kaleo", to call), was used among the Greeks of a body of citizens gathered to discuss the affairs of State (Acts 19:39). In the Sept. it is used to designate the gathering of Israel, summoned for any definite purpose, or a gathering regarded as representative of the whole nation. In Acts 7:38 it is used of Israel; in 19:32,41, of a riotous mob. It has two applications to companies of Christians, (a) to the whole company of the redeemed throughout the present era, the company of which Christ said, "I will build My Church," Matt. 16:18, and which is further described as "the Church which is His Body" Eph. 1:22; 5:23, (b) in the singular number (e.g., Matt. 18:17, R.V. marg., "congregation"), to a company consisting of professed believers, e.g., Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:13; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:5, and in the plural, with reference to churches in a district.³

The picture of this word is separation. Those who are members of the church of Christ are those who have come to Christ and have come away from everyone and everything else as a ruler. Jesus invites: "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). One cannot come to Jesus while giving allegiance to another master. Remember that "no man can serve two masters" (6:24). One must come to Jesus, of whom it is said, "thou hast the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

The word “church” then, refers to that which pertains to the Lord and to those who have come to Christ and away from any other religious ruler. Let us notice, further, some things about the church of Christ.

Description Of The Church Of Christ

The Church Of Christ Is The Called Out

We have seen that the word Jesus used for “church” (*ekklesia*) carries the idea of separation. Those who are members of the church of Christ are those who have been called out of the world, through obedience to the Gospel of Christ (2 Thess. 2:14), to Christ. The church is made up of those who are separated to Jesus. There is a line of cleavage between the Christian and the world.

Christians are not of the world. As the apostles were not of the world (John 17:14), those who imitate their spiritual lifestyle (1 Cor. 11:1), are not of the world.

Christians must not love the world (1 John 2:15-17; Col. 3:1-3; Jas. 4:4). Christians are not in fellowship with the works of the world (Eph. 5:11). Christians are separated from the world (2 Cor. 6:17-7:1). Christians have been delivered from the world (Gal. 1:4; Col. 1:13). Christians do not conform to the world (Rom. 12:2; 1 Pet. 1:14).

If one can be saved outside of the Lord’s church, he can be saved in the world and while being controlled by the world. He would then be saved out of the Christ and without being controlled by the Christ. A casual study of the Bible will show that such cannot be the case. **No! One cannot be saved outside of the Lord’s church.**

The Church Of Christ Is The Kingdom Of God

The Bible describes the church as a kingdom: “No other term of reference is used for the church more often than ‘the kingdom’ of God or heaven.”⁴

The Old Testament had prophesied of the coming and establishment of this kingdom (Psm. 2:6-7; Jer. 23:5; Dan. 2:44; 7:13-14). It is no surprise, then, that the New Testament records the fulfillment of these prophecies.

Jesus is the king of the kingdom (Luke 1:32-33; 23:2-3; Matt. 2:2; John 1:49; 12:13; 18:37; 1 Tim. 6:15). He "went about...preaching the gospel of the kingdom..." (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 13:19; 16:28; 24:14). He promised to build the church which is the kingdom (16:18-19).

The church is referred to as the "kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 16:19; 3:2; 4:17; 10:7, 13:24); "kingdom of God" (Matt. 6:33; 12:28; Mark 1:15; 9:1); "the kingdom of the Son of his love" (Col. 1:13). Each of these descriptions tells something about the nature of the church or kingdom.

The kingdom is in existence now, and one may become a member of it by obeying God's plan of salvation. The kingdom was to "come with power" (Mark 9:1). The power was to come to the apostles when the Holy Spirit came upon them (Acts 1:8). The apostles were to "wait for the promise of the Father" in Jerusalem, where they would be "baptized in the Holy Spirit" (1:4-5). The power and Holy Spirit came in Acts 2. Since the kingdom was to come when the power and Holy Spirit came, and since the power and Holy Spirit came on Pentecost of Acts 2, the kingdom (church) was established on Pentecost of Acts 2.

If one can be saved outside of the Lord's church, he can be saved in the devil's kingdom because those who are not in the kingdom of the Christ are in Satan's kingdom. But one cannot be saved in the devil's kingdom. **No! One cannot be saved outside of the Lord's church.**

The Church Of Christ Is The House Of God

The word "house" is used to designate a family (Luke 1:27; Acts 10:2; Heb. 11:7). The Bible refers to the family

of God as His house. Paul wrote to Timothy that “men ought to behave themselves in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). Paul refers to the church as the “household of God” (Eph. 2:19) and the “household of the faith” (Gal. 6:10). The Hebrews writer referred to the church as “his house” (Heb. 3:6).

God is the father in this spiritual family. What a privilege it is to pray to “Our Father who art in heaven” (Matt. 6:9) and to know that “one is your Father, even he who is in heaven” (23:9). It is comforting to know that as a member of the family of God we enjoy “peace from God our Father” (Rom. 1:7). All confusion disappears when we realize there is only one Father in God’s spiritual family, the church (1 Cor. 8:6; Eph. 4:6). God offers to be a Father to those who heed the call to “Come ye out from among them, and be ye separate... And touch no unclean thing” (2 Cor. 6:17-18).

Jesus Christ is the elder brother in the family of God. Paul called Him the “firstborn among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29). Jesus is not ashamed of those who are faithful children in God’s family, the church (Heb. 2:11-12,17). What a thrilling thought to think that as Christians we are “joint-heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:17).

Those who obey the Gospel plan of salvation are children in the family of God (Gal. 4:6-7; Rom. 8:14,16-17; Eph. 5:1,8; 1 John 3:1-2). What a privilege it is to be called a child of God and hold membership in His spiritual family, the church!

All of God’s children are in His family, and He has but one family. God has no illegitimate children. Everyone who is a child of God is a member of His family, the church. To be a member of something besides the family of God makes one a child of the devil (John 8:44).

If one can be saved outside of the Lord's church, he can be saved while being a member of the devil's family. **No! One cannot be saved outside of the Lord's church.**

The Church Of Christ Is The Body Of Christ

The church, which is the called out, the kingdom and the house of God, is also referred to as the body of Christ. Paul reminded the Romans that "even as we have many members in one body, and all the members have not the same office: so we, who are many, are one body in Christ" (Rom. 12:4-5). To the Corinthians he wrote: "Now ye are the body of Christ" (1 Cor. 12:27).

Jesus is the head of His body. His dominion over the church is complete. God "put all things in subjection under his feet, and gave him to be head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all" (Eph. 1:22-23). Paul told the Colossians:

he is the head of the body, the church...Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and fill up on my part that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake which is the church (Col. 1:18,24).

The church is subject to the authority of Jesus, who is the head. He has given, in His inspired Word (2 Tim. 3:16-17), all that pertains to life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3) and all that is needed to make each member complete. One must turn to the Bible to know about the body and how to behave in the body of Christ. It is important that all read and obey that Word.

The Bible teaches that Jesus is the "saviour of the body" (Eph. 5:23). If I am to be saved, I must be in that which Christ has promised to save. The saved were added

to the church (Acts 2:47), which is His body (Col. 1:18,24). In order to be saved by the Christ, I must be a member of His body, the church!

There is only one body for the control of the one head. Daniel prophesied of the sovereignty of the church residing in one (Dan. 2:44). Paul said that there is “one body” (Eph. 4:4; 2:16; Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:20). To have more than one body for one head is to have a monstrosity. In all of God’s Word, one will find only one body for one head (Jesus), and that one body is the church.

If one can be saved outside of the Lord’s church, he can be saved without being a member of that which Christ saves and without being in the one body that is controlled by the Christ. **No! One cannot be saved outside of the Lord’s church.**

The Church Of Christ Is The Bride Of Christ

While using the figure of a kingdom, a house, and a body to describe the church, the Bible also uses the figure of a bride. The Old Testament used the figure of marriage to refer to God’s relationship with Israel. Jehovah said to Israel, “...I am a husband to you” (Jer. 3:14; 31:32). So also the New Testament uses the figure of marriage to describe the relationship of Jesus to His church.

John the Immerser described Jesus as the “bridegroom” and himself as the “friend of the bridegroom” (John 3:29). In that great comparison between Jesus, the church, and the marriage relationship, Paul said, “This mystery is great: but I speak in regard of Christ and of the church” (Eph. 5:22-33). He reminded the Romans that they “were made dead to the law through the body of Christ; that ye should be joined to another, even to him who was raised from the dead” (Rom. 7:4). He, further, said to those in Corinth that he had “espoused you to one husband, that I might present you as a pure virgin to Christ” (2 Cor. 11:2).

John was told by the angel that he would “show thee the bride, the wife of the Lamb” (Rev. 21:9).

Jesus is married to only one bride. He is not a polygamist, and He will not countenance spiritual adultery. Since Jesus is married to only one bride, and that bride is the church, there can only be one church. This is also true because Jesus promised to build only one church (Matt. 16:13-20), added the saved to only one church (Acts 2:47), is the head of only one church (Col. 1:18), died for only one church (Acts 20:28), and is the savior of only one church (Eph. 5:23).

The attitude one manifests toward the church of Christ is the attitude he manifests toward Christ. There is no such thing as loving Christ and not loving His church. Saul is said to have “laid waste the church” (Acts 8:3). When he met Jesus on the road to Damascus, Jesus asked: “why persecutest thou me?” (9:4). To lay waste the church was the same as persecuting Jesus. If I consider the church as a nonessential, I am considering Christ as a nonessential. If I believe I am as well off outside the church as inside, I believe I am as well off outside Christ as in Him..

If one can be saved outside of the Lord's church, he can be saved without being a part of the bride of which Christ is the bridegroom. **No! One cannot be saved outside of the Lord's church.**

Delineation Of Blessings Received As A Member Of The Church Of Christ

When the Lord adds one to the church of Christ, that one is blessed abundantly. One enjoys things as a result of his relationship to Christ that cannot be enjoyed outside of this relationship. In answering the question of our study, we would do well to enumerate some of the blessings of being a member of the church of Christ.

***Members Of The Church Of Christ
Receive All Spiritual Blessings***

Paul reminded the Ephesians that God has “blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3). Note that spiritual blessings are “in Christ.” To be in Christ is to be in His church. Paul says that “as many of you as were baptized into Christ did put on Christ” (Gal. 3:27). When one is baptized, in obedience to the Gospel plan of salvation, he is added to the church of Christ (Acts 2:37-47). If one can be saved outside of the Lord’s church, he can be saved without receiving all spiritual blessings. **No! One cannot be saved outside of the Lord’s church.**

***Members Of The Church Of Christ
Have Received Redemption From Sin***

Sin separates from God (Isa. 59:1-2). When Christ died on Calvary, He did so to pay the penalty for sin (Heb. 13:10-12). When I apply His sacrifice, by obeying His plan of salvation, I am redeemed from sin. Paul said that it was in Christ that “we have our redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses” (Eph. 1:7). In Colossians 1:14, he says it brings the “forgiveness of our sins.” To be in Christ is to be in His church. If one can be saved outside of the Lord’s church, he can be saved without redemption from sin. **No! One cannot be saved outside of the Lord’s church.**

***Members Of The Church of Christ Receive
The Benefits Of The Blood Of Christ***

Jesus described His blood as being “poured out for many unto remission of sins” (Matt. 26:28). Remember that Christ loved the church so much that He “gave himself up for it” (Eph. 5:25). We must never lose sight of the fact that the church was “purchased with his own blood” (Acts

20:28). Christians remain clean by walking in the light and knowing that, when they do so, "the blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

One contacts the blood of Christ when he is "buried therefore with him through baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4).

But when one is baptized, he is added to the church (Acts 2:37-47). The power of the blood of the Christ is remembered weekly as Christians observe the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 10:16; 11:25). If one can be saved outside of the Lord's church, he can be saved outside the blood of Christ. **No! One cannot be saved outside of the Lord's church.**

Members Of The Church Of Christ Wear The Name of Christ

"...the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch" (Acts 11:26). Paul had so convinced Agrippa of the truth of the Gospel that Agrippa exclaimed: "With but little persuasion thou wouldest fain make me a Christian" (Acts 26:28).

There was no doubt in Agrippa's mind what he would be if he obeyed the Gospel plan of salvation. Peter told Christians that "if a man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God in this name" (1 Pet. 4:16).

One has no New Testament authority to wear the name of anyone but the Christ. The wearing of the name of Christ indicates that one belongs to Christ (1 Cor. 1:12). If one can be saved outside of the Lord's church, he can be saved without wearing the name of the Christ, which indicates he belongs to Christ. **No! One cannot be saved outside of the Lord's church.**

Members Of The Church Of Christ Have Been Reconciled To God

Paul said that “all things are of God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and gave unto us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself...” (2 Cor. 5:18-19). We are reconciled “in one body unto God through the cross, having slain the enmity thereby” (Eph. 2:16). This reconciled relationship is enjoyed in the church because the “one body” is the church (Col. 1:18,24; Eph. 4:4).

If one is not reconciled to God, he is separated from God. One cannot serve God nor be saved while he is separated from Him. If one can be saved outside of the Lord’s church, he can be saved without being reconciled to God and while separated from Him. **No! One cannot be saved outside of the Lord’s church.**

Details Of Activities Engaged In By Members Of The Church Of Christ

One who is a member of the church of Christ is to be active. Some of the activities in which members of the church engage should be noticed as we develop our study.

Members Of The Church Of Christ Are To Worship

It is interesting that from the first day of the establishment of the church one reads that New Testament Christians “continued stedfastly in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in prayers” (Acts 2:42). One who worships God must remember that “God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24).

Members of the church of Christ assemble every first day of the week to engage in the singing of “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Eph. 5:19), to partake of the Lord’s Supper

(Acts 20:7), to give as prospered (1 Cor. 16:1-2), to pray (Acts 2:42), and to study from God's Word (20:7).

One understands that God accepts the worship of those who are faithful members of the church of Christ. Jesus said that the Lord's Supper was to be observed "in my Father's kingdom" (Matt. 26:29). But the kingdom is the church (16:18-19). One enjoys the relationship with God in worship as a member of the church.

If one can be saved outside of the Lord's church, he can be saved out of that in which acceptable worship is to be offered to God. **No! One cannot be saved outside of the Lord's church.**

Members Of The Church Of Christ Practice Pure Religion

Pure religion and undefiled before our God and Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world" (Jas. 1:27).

Christians are to be active in caring for those in need. This was a prominent activity in the early church (Acts 6:1-6; Gal. 6:10). Jesus said that those who practiced this kind of lifestyle would be rewarded (Matt. 25:34-40; 1 John 3:16-18).

Christians are also to give attention to keeping themselves unspotted from the world. Pure religion requires one to "live soberly and righteously and godly in this present world" (Tit. 2:12). The lifestyle of the Christian is to be an example to those who see him.

James was writing to "brethren" (Jas. 1:2). One enjoys the relationship as brethren in the church (Phil. 1:1; 4:1). If one can be saved outside of the Lord's church, he can be saved without practicing pure religion. **No! One cannot be saved outside of the Lord's church.**

***Members Of The Church Of Christ
Are To Abhor That Which Is Evil***

In becoming Christians, being added to the church, we have separated ourselves from that which is evil (2 Cor. 6:14-7:1). The Christian is to “abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thess. 5:22). Both sides of the picture are presented when Paul says that we are to “Abhor that which is evil: cleave to that which is good” (Rom. 12:9). It is not enough just to stay away from evil, we must replace it with good.

If one can be saved outside of the Lord’s church, he can be saved out of that institution that is to “work that which is good toward all men, and especially toward them that are of the household of the faith” (Gal. 6:10). **No! One cannot be saved outside of the Lord’s church.**

***Members Of The Church Of Christ
Are To Teach The Word Of God To Others***

Jesus commanded the apostles to “Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations...teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20). Paul told Timothy, “And the things which thou hast heard from me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2).

We are to teach the Scriptures in order that “the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work” (3:17). An accountable person who has not obeyed the plan of salvation is teaching, by example, if not by word, that one does not have to comply with all that is found in the New Testament. He is not teaching that which is revealed in God’s Word.

If one can be saved outside of the Lord’s church, he can be saved out of that institution which is charged with preaching and teaching the Word of God to all mankind. **No! One cannot be saved outside of the Lord’s church.**

***Members Of The Church Of Christ
Enjoy Fellowship With God And One Another***

One of the wonderful blessings of being a Christian is that of being in fellowship with God and His people. From Genesis to Revelation, God has placed great emphasis on His relationship with His people. God's laws have been given in order that man may maintain fellowship with Him.

Fellowship with God, today, is manifested in the work and worship of the church. Fellowship with God is enjoyed as one walks in the light (1 John 1:7), and fellowship with other Christians is enjoyed as they work together to carry out God's work (1 John 1:4; Phile. 7).

If one can be saved outside of the Lord's church, he can be saved out of that fellowship with God and fellow-Christians. **No! One cannot be saved outside of the Lord's church.**

Conclusion

No! One cannot be saved outside of the Lord's church. We must get this message to all the world. The church is essential and important in one's salvation. One cannot accept the Man and ignore the Plan!

The church is founded upon the Deity of the Christ, and "other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 3:11). This foundation was so important that Jesus had to die to make it possible. One should want to build upon that solid foundation (Matt. 7:24-27). In order to become a member of the church of Christ and be saved from sins, one must believe that Jesus is the Christ (John 8:24). This faith comes "of hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). One must repent of sins (Acts 17:30), confess faith in the Christ (Acts 8:37; Rom. 10:9-10) and be baptized unto the remission of his sins (Acts 2:38; Mark 16:16).

Dear friend, will you not obey this beautiful plan of salvation today and be saved from sins? The Lord will add you to His church and you may enjoy the blessings we have discussed. May we all be determined to so live our lives that God will be glorified.

Endnotes

1 All quotations are from the **American Standard Version** of 1901.

2 Basil Overton, "What Is 'The Church'?" **Gospel Advocate**, Volume 110, Number 10 (7 March 1968), p. 152.

3 W.E. Vine, **An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words** (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1966), pp. 83-84.

4 Dillard Thurman, "Just What Is The Church?" **Gospel Minutes**, Volume 35, Number 23 (6 June 1986), p. 1.

CHAPTER 32

The Future Destiny Of The Lord's Church

Tom Wacaster

Introduction

WHAT A MARVELOUS THEME has been selected for this year's **POWER** Lectureship. And what a marvelous subject is ours to consider in this chapter. Having studied the church of the past, and having agonized over the struggles of the church present, we turn our attention to the future destiny of the Lord's church.

There are two passages that we want to get before us for this study. The first of these texts is located in 1 Corinthians 15:24-28:

Then cometh the end, when he shall deliver up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have abolished all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be abolished is death. For, He put all things in subjection under his feet. But when he saith, All things are put in subjection, it is evident that he is excepted who did subject all things unto him. And when all things have been subjected unto him, then shall the Son also himself be subjected to him that did subject all things unto him, that God may be all in all.

Our second passage is found in Revelation 7:9-10 and 13-17:

After these things I saw, and behold, a great multitude, which no man could number, out of every nation and of all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, arrayed in white robes, and palms in their hands; and they cry with a great voice, saying, Salvation unto our God who sitteth on the throne, and unto the Lamb...And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, These that are arrayed in white robes, who are they, and whence came they? And I say unto him, My lord, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they that come out of the great tribulation, and they washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God; and they serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall spread his tabernacle over them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun strike upon them, nor any heat: for the Lamb that is in the midst of the throne shall be their shepherd, and shall guide them unto fountains of waters of life: and God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes.

We see the church **militant** in verses 1-8, marching in the wilderness, guarded and protected by God. In verses 9-14 we see the church **triumphant**. They have won the battle; they have come forth victorious; they now receive the comfort that is given from God. We are given a glorious vision of the future destiny of the Lord's church.

Why study the future destiny of the church? First, because God thought it good to do so! He revealed in the Scriptures the future destiny of the church. It is good,

therefore, to preach on this subject. Second, because it serves as a motivation to keep us going. Some of you may recognize the name of Florence Chadwick, the famous woman swimmer who, a number of years ago, gained world renown by swimming the English Channel. Some time prior to this successful venture she had made an unsuccessful attempt. The fog had settled in so thickly over the channel that it was impossible for her to see her destination, and she gave up less than a mile from her goal. As she later commented on this failure, she said, "I could have made it if I could have seen the shore." God has given us a glimpse of that "final destiny" that shall be ours. It should motivate and encourage every child of God who is "looking for and earnestly desiring the coming day of God" (2 Pet. 3:12).

It is good to begin with definition of some terms. Webster defines destiny as "a person's destined fate or lot; order of things fixed or established by divine decree, or by connection of causes and effects."¹ In this lesson, we are concerned with the final state of God's people, which will remain in the "future" so long as this earth shall stand. Finally, by "the Lord's church" we mean Christ's church as it stands separate and apart from the multitudinous religious organizations of men. It is the body which Jesus shall save (Eph. 5:23), nothing more and nothing less. Hence, when we speak of the future destiny of the church, we are speaking of that final place of rest that awaits all the faithful children of God (1:3).

From the general subject of eschatology, let us now turn our attention to "The Final Destiny of the Lord's Church." We propose to take a close look at the church's final destiny under two headings: (1) A Great Place and (2) A Great People.

A Great Place

Words simply cannot begin to describe the place where God's people shall dwell for all eternity. All we know for certain is that it will be a great place. Our recognition

that heaven will be a great place is expressed in the very songs that we sing. A casual perusal of any song book used in our worship reveals a great number of songs that refer to that final home that shall be ours. Songs are an expression of the inner joy, contentment, and hope in the heart of every child of God. Think for a moment about the songs that we sing, and how the very words thrill our souls:

When the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall arise, And the splendors immortal shall envelop the skies; When the angel of death shall no longer destroy, And the dead shall awaken in the morning of joy.

Beautiful robes of white, beautiful land of light, Beautiful home so bright, where there shall come no night. Beautiful crown I'll wear, shining and bright o'er there, Yonder in mansions fair, gather us there.

Ever thankful am I that my Savior and Lord, Promised unto the weary sweet rest. Nothing more could I ask than a mansion above, There to live with the saved and the blest.

Glory is waiting, waiting up yonder, Where we shall spend an endless day; There with our Savior, we'll be forever, Where no more sorrow can dismay.

When by the gift of His infinite grace, I am accorded in heaven a place, Just to be there and to look on His face, Will through the ages be glory for me!

All of our struggles that we might go through will surely be worth it all. Paul wrote: "I reckon that the

sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to usward” (Rom. 8:18). The words of the song express it well:

Often I'm hindered on my way;
Burdened so heavy I almost fall;
Then I hear Jesus sweetly say:
Heaven will surely be worth it all.

Many the trials, toils and tears,
Many a heartache may here appall;
But the dear Lord so truly says,
Heaven will surely be worth it all.

Toiling and pain I will endure,
Till I shall hear the death angel call;
Jesus has promised and I'm sure,
Heaven will surely be worth it all.

Heaven will surely be worth it all.
Worth all the sorrows that here befall;
After the life with all its strife;
Heaven will surely be worth it all.

What an impossible task it is to adequately describe and define that place. Were I provided every word, from a wide bank of languages and cultures, and given an eternity to write of this place we call home, my tongue simply could not express nor my pen write of the beauty and majesty that shall be ours to enjoy throughout the endless ages. In an effort to keep our goal before us, to help us “see” with the eye of faith that city which the patriarchs of old sought and to which they sojourned, let me suggest the following salient facts about that heavenly city, the “home of the soul.”

First, **heaven is a real place**. Heaven is not some imaginary dream land. Jesus promised:

In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I come again, and will receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also (John 14:2-3).

Someone once suggested that "heaven is to be something rather than to go somewhere." But our Lord said "I go to prepare a **place**." Some men are like the skeptic who confidently affirmed, "There is no heaven, for I can't find it with my telescope." But, our universe is enormous. Every night in Mt. Palomar, in southern California, capable and dedicated astronomers use a five-hundred ton Hale telescope, with the two-hundred inch lens (40,000 times more powerful than the human eye) to photograph galaxies which they declare to be one billion light years from earth! At 186,000 miles per second, it would take one billion years to travel across one of those galaxies. Recently, Marten Schmidt discovered a quasar estimated to be eight billion light years away. And then some infinitesimal speck on a speck has the audacity to look through his telescope and declare, "There is no heaven; I can't see it." My Jesus said, "I go to prepare a **place!!!**" That's enough for me!

Second, **heaven is a prepared place**. While on earth, and prior to His heavenly ascension, our Lord was a carpenter. Imagine, if you will, the quality of His work. As the Master Builder (Heb. 1:1-3; John 1:1-3), not only did our Lord promise to "build" His church, but He said He would go and "prepare a place" for us. He will do His job if we will but do ours. The question remains, therefore, as to what **materials** He has with which to build. His admonition for us to "lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven" suggest that we are sending the materials on ahead for the building and construction of our "mansion."

Third, **heaven is a place of perfect comfort**. What a joy it will be to cross eternity's threshold to a land where

we will rest from our labors and enjoy blessed comfort for endless ages. It will be a place of comfort for the following reasons. First, because *it is the place where I will see Jesus my Lord*. While living in Ada, Oklahoma, I had the privilege of becoming acquainted with Peter "Major" Minor, a brother in Christ who had, at an early age, been stricken with cerebral palsy. The disease left him crippled and blind from a young age. He once talked about his blindness, and his enduring hope that some day he might once again see. I shall never forget his comment on that occasion: "If I never receive my sight in this life, on the resurrection day the first face I shall see will be that of my Lord. That makes it all worthwhile." The poet put it this way:

Soon shall come the time of parting,
O how glorious it will be;
When I step across the threshold
Of the mansion built for me.
Free from earthly care and sorrow,
Safe at last in heaven's bourn!
When I step across the threshold
On that great triumphant morn.

There to rest in peace forever,
There eternity to spend,
When I step across the threshold
And my journey here shall end.
Needless then all earthly treasures;
Riches there I'll find untold;
When I step across the threshold
Of that city paved with gold.

I shall wonder at His mercy,
At His gracious love and care,
When I step across the threshold
To that land so bright and fair.
There I'll hear the angel chorus

In praising voices blend;
When I step across the threshold
Where time shall never end.

And I'll meet departed loved ones
On yonder golden strand
When I step across the threshold
Into the promised land.
But to **greet my loving Savior,**
The greatest joy of all,
When I step across that threshold
In answer to His call.

Second, heaven will be a place of comfort because ***I will meet the redeemed of all ages.*** Moses, Abraham, Isaiah and Jeremiah, David and Noah, the three Hebrews: Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, Paul and Peter, James and John, Mary, the woman who bore our Lord into this world of woe; they will all be there. Third, heaven will be a comfortable place ***because of the sweet rest that shall be ours:***

And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth, Yea saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors; and their works do follow them (Rev. 14:13).

What a marvelous blessing it is to know that “there remaineth therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God” (Hebrews 4:9). The final destiny of the Lord’s church will include rest at the end of the row:

I wandered from the city with its
Noise and dusty streets,
And walked out in the country
Where the air was pure and sweet;

And as I looked around me
T'was in the early morn,
Across the hill I saw then
A farmer plowing corn.

It seemed that in an instant
The scene changed to long ago,
And I, a little child again,
Was following the row;
As I often did behind my dad,
We must hoe the corn 'just so';
And if we did, dad always said:
"You may rest at the end of the row."

I see it now, the same old field,
Dad sweating at the plow;
We children following with our hoes,
With him to show us how.
And he always said: "Now do it right
And cut the weeds as you go,"
And if we did what father said,
We could rest at the end of the row.

The years have flown,
We children grown
And father is here no more.
But now I gaze on
That field of corn like
We hoed in the days of yore,
And compare this life
To that field of corn
As we toil here below.
For Father has said
If we do our work right
We shall rest at the end of the row.

Heaven will be a comfortable place ***because I will never again suffer any pain, illness, or affliction.*** No

more cancer, diabetes, arthritis, or any number of physical ailments that afflict me in this life, but God shall “wipe away every tear from their eyes; and death shall be no more; neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain, any more” (Rev. 21:4):

But though our outward man is decaying, yet our inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is for the moment, worketh for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things that are not seen are eternal (2 Cor. 4:16-18).

Finally, heaven will be a comfortable place because ***I will never shed another tear, never again be separated from my loved ones, and never know death any more*** (Revelation 21:4).

Fourth, **heaven is a prepared place of perfect comfort in the pearly city.** Pictures of the Grand Canyon can not prepare someone for the breathtaking reality that one experiences when he first stands at the edge of the precipice and gazes into the vast chasm of the Colorado River. Brother Tillit Teddie must have had something similar on his mind when he wrote the following words about heaven: “We read of its beauties, but somehow we know, Its glory has never been told. But think of the rapturous singing up there, In that beautiful city of gold!”

Using John’s Revelation as a reference, consider this Pearly City in which we shall dwell. As we approach the city we are impressed with the sheer size of it. Here is a city that is 12,000 furlongs wide, 12,000 furlongs long, and 12,000 furlongs high. If this were a literal description we would be looking at a city 1,500 miles cubed; a city so

large that it would span the distance from here to the West Coast, to the Canadian boarder, east to the Great Lakes, and back home again. As we approach this wonderful city we notice that entrance thereto is through one of twelve gates, each one made of a single pearl. Comedian Justin Wilson is credited with commenting, "Whew, I'd like to see the size of that oyster." Here is beauty beyond imagination.

Next we observe the walls of the city, gleaming with precious stones: jasper, sapphire, chalcedony, emerald, sardonyx, sardius, chrysolite, beryl, topaz, chrysoprase, jacinth, and amethyst. We see that the city has twelve foundations, "adorned" with these precious stones. As we walk through the city we notice that we are walking on pure gold. That precious metal for which men paid so high a price will finally have its proper place, to be trodden upon by the feet of immortal saints of all ages.

In the midst of the city is the throne of God and the Lamb. God is accessible to man. We can approach Him, speak to Him, enjoy sweet communion with Him, and with His Son Who loved us and gave Himself for us. Out of this throne there flows a river—a river of the water of life—bright, crystal clear, with abundance for all to drink. On either side of the river there is the tree of life, bearing precious fruit, with leaves that are for the healing of the nations. In that city we shall enjoy one eternal day, for there will be no sun, no moon, or stars to light the sky by night—only one continuous, eternal day.

Oh yes! What a great place that will be:

There's no disappointment in heaven,
No weariness, sorrow or pain;
No hearts that are bleeding and broken,
No song with a minor refrain.
The clouds of our earthly horizon

Will never appear in the sky,
For all will be sunshine and gladness,
With never a sob or a sigh.

We'll never pay rent for our mansion.
The taxes will never come due;
Our garments will never grow threadbare,
But always be fadeless and new;
We'll never be hungry or thirsty,
Nor languish in poverty there,
For all the rich bounties of heaven
His sanctified children will share.

There'll never be crepe on the doorknob,
No graves on the hillsides of glory,
For there we shall never more die.
The old will be young there forever,
Transformed in a moment of time;
Immortal we'll stand in His likeness,
The stars and sun to outshine.

I'm bound for that beautiful city
My Lord has prepared for His own:
Where all the redeemed of all the ages
Sing 'Glory' around the white throne;
Sometimes I grow homesick for heaven,
And the glories I there shall behold.
What a joy that will be when my Savior I see,
In that beautiful city of gold.²

A Great People

A consideration of the final destiny of the Lord's church begs that at least a portion of our lecture address the people who shall be there. The final destiny of the Lord's church is the destiny of a chosen people. They are identified by a certain criteria. The Psalmist asks, and then answers, "Lord, who shall abide in thy tabernacle?"

who shall dwell in thy holy hill?" (Psm. 15:1). He then sets forth slightly less than a dozen marks of that man who shall dwell with God. God's intention in establishing the church was, among other things, to prepare a people for heaven. It is our Lord's purpose to "present the church to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:27):

For the grace of God hath appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us, to the intent that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly and righteously and godly in this present world (Tit. 2:11-12).

Our final destiny is to dwell with those of "like precious faith" (2 Peter 1:1), a people of pure heart, holy hands, and impeccable faith. That city is for those people who are looking for the "city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:10). Beloved, **it is more than just the walls**, or the gates of pearl, or the street of gold that makes us long for that eternal home. It is **who** is going to be there as much as **what** awaits us.

In the 1970's and 80's I had the privilege of conducting a summer camp for 4th-6th graders. As director, I (and a number of the staff) made it a point to arrive the day before the campers did in order to make sure that things were ready and prepared for their arrival the following day. We would anxiously await the start of camp session. The next six days were filled with activities and association with some of the best people on the face of this earth. At week's end, when that final camper had packed his bags and climbed aboard that church bus or family wagon to head for home, a number of the staff would linger to say our final good-byes. The place was the same

place it had been all week: the trees and rocks, the cabins and swimming hole—these things were all still there. But when the people left, that camp became unbearably lonely. It was the children that made camp enjoyable. And it is the people with whom we shall associate for all eternity that will make heaven a truly enjoyable place to live. An unknown author has written:

When I was a boy I used to think of heaven as a glorious golden city, with jeweled walls and gates of pearl, with nobody in it but the angels and they were all strangers to me. But after a while my little brother died; then I thought of heaven as that great city full of angels with just one little fellow in it that I was acquainted with. He was the only one that I knew there at the time. Then another brother died and there were two in heaven that I knew. Then my acquaintances began to die, and the number of my friends in heaven grew larger all the time. But it was not until one of my little ones was taken that I began to feel that I had a personal interest in the home of the soul. Then a second went, and a third, and a fourth; and so many of my friends and loved ones have gone there that it seems as if I know more in heaven than I know on earth. And now when my thoughts turn to heaven, it is not the gold and the jewels, and the pearls I think of—but the loved ones there. It is not the place so much as the company that makes heaven seem beautiful.³

One of the most beautiful songs in our songbook addresses that final gathering of God's people:

And tho' some go before us, we'll all meet again;
Just inside the city as we enter in;

There'll be no more parting, with Jesus we'll be
Together forever, God's family!

And sometimes we laugh together,
Sometimes we cry;
Sometimes we share together,
Heartaches and sighs.
Sometimes we dream together of how it will be
When we all get to heaven,
God's family!⁴

The question has often been raised, "Will we know one another in heaven?" I am confident that we will know one another. Memory shall be one faculty that we will not lose in eternity (Luke 16:25). One resident of a nursing home remarked, "I'm glad memory will be in heaven, because I sure don't have it here."

Will we know one another? The Scriptures seem to indicate so. First, there are Paul's encouraging words in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14 and 18. Evidently there was concern among the Thessalonian brethren as to whether they would ever see their departed loved ones again. Paul assures them that they were not to sorrow as those "who have no hope." Hope of what? Hope of ever seeing their loved ones again. Jesus would bring those loved ones with Him when He returned. In view of the fact that Paul instructs us to "comfort one another with these words," it only seems reasonable that he spoke of the promise of reunion with our loved ones who, having been faithful to the Lord, would rejoin us in the distant future.

Second, there is the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31. Of particular interest is the fact that the rich man realized that his five brethren were not in that place of torment.

Third, there is the statement from Moses concerning Abraham, in Genesis 25:8: "Then Abraham gave up the

ghost, and died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years; and was gathered to his people.” Of particular interest is the phrase “and was gathered to his people.” The same language is used to describe the death of Ishmael (25:17), Isaac (35:29), Jacob (49:29,33), and Moses and Aaron (Deut. 32:50). In view of the fact that Moses was buried in an unknown place, the language cannot refer to the final resting place of his physical body. When Moses wrote that “he was gathered to his people,” it was heaven’s way of saying that Abraham was reunited with those whom he knew. Yes, we will know one another beyond the grave.

Fourth, David observed at the death of his infant child, “Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me” (2 Sam. 12:23). The comfort which David derived was conditioned upon his going to that place where the child had gone. If there is no recognition of our loved ones in heaven, then this child would mean no more to David than any other. Add to these the incidental references to the joy that shall be ours in passages such as Philippians 4:1, 2 Corinthians 1:14, and 1 Thessalonians 2:19, and we must conclude that this earth will not be the cessation of our association with faithful and godly loved ones. The late Guy N. Woods once addressed this question as follows:

Whether we shall know each other in heaven is truly a question of more than merely curious interest. Every thoughtful person who has suffered the poignant pain of parting from those near and dear and has tenderly laid their physical forms to rest in the tomb is vitally and absorbingly interested in the implications which this question raises. He knows that he shall see them no more in this land of the living; that they have passed beyond the door of death to return to this world no more. If there is no future

recognition, the moment of parting at the grave, however forbidding the thought may be, becomes the hour of final separation. Soon we, too, shall divest ourselves of the mortal robe with which we are clothed here, and go to join the teeming millions of our race who have lived and loved and at last gone to take their places in the silent halls of death. On the morning of the resurrection day we shall rise to stand in judgment and to hear the pronouncement of our eternal destiny. If there is to be no recognition, we shall there be among total strangers; every memory we now possess will have been obliterated and every bond here severed, and as strangers we shall enter heaven and so live there forever and ever.⁵

How sweet it will be to be reunited with our faithful loved ones; to sit together at the feet of Jesus our Lord for eternity, along with the redeemed of all the ages; and to sing praises to our God for His wonderful grace and redeeming love that made our final destiny one that is so rich and full.

Conclusion

We have considered the final destiny of the Lord's church, giving special attention to (1) that Great Place and (2) the Great People who shall be there. Is heaven your home? Can you confidently say that you are on the road that will take you to that city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God? Would that every single person within the influence of this book might make that journey safely home. That will truly be joy.

How interested are you in heaven? Are you so enthralled with your friends that you are neglecting your higher calling? Do the trinkets of life blind your eyes to

the true riches that are available in Christ our Lord? Why is it that men are satisfied with the mere baubles of materialism when they could have the wealth of heaven? One hundred years from now it will not make one iota of difference as to the cars we drove, the land we owned, or the size of a house we lived in. The only thing that will matter is whether we faithfully served God. Peter has warned us:

the day of the Lord will come as a thief: in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall be dissolved with fervent heat, and the earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up (2 Pet. 3:10).

The **destiny of the world** is naught but destruction. But **the destiny of the Lord's church** is eternal joy and happiness throughout the endless ages. As one put it, "Heaven can get along without us, but we can't very well get along without heaven." Will you be there when all of the faithful have been gathered home?

Endnotes

1 **Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary of The English Language** (New York, NY: Croler Incorporation), p. 235.

2 **Strength For Daily Living** (Pulaski, TN: Sain Publications, 1996), pp. 312-313, Sixth Annual Truth In Love Lectureship.

3 **Soldiers of Christ Arise** (Pulaski, TN: Sain Publications, 1995), pp. 304-305, Fifth Annual Truth In Love Lectureship.

4 Lanny Wolfe, **God's Family** (1974).

5 Guy N. Woods, **Shall We Know One Another In Heaven?** (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate, 1988), p. 8.