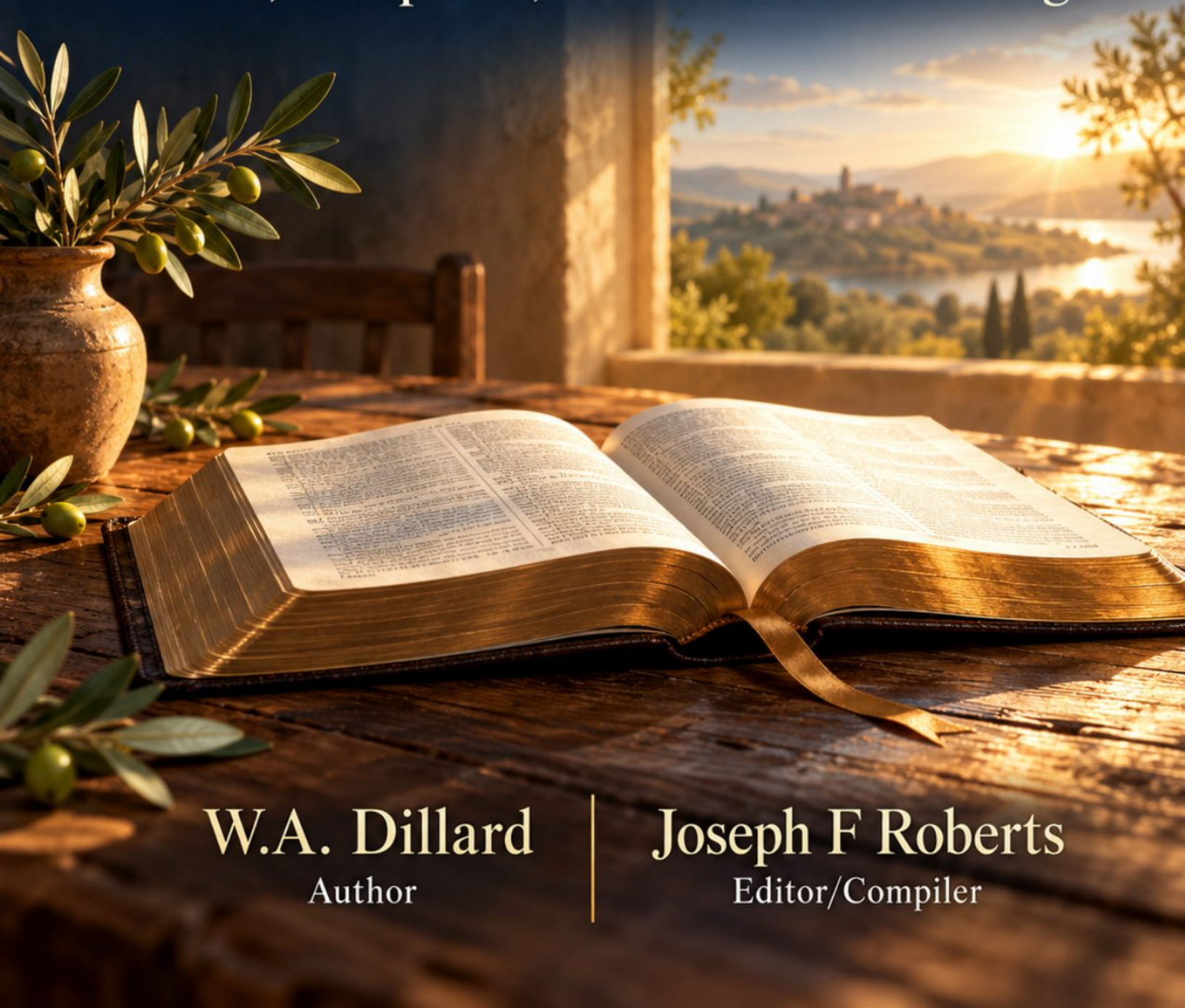


DEVOTIONAL REFLECTIONS

Faith, Scripture, and Christian Living



W.A. Dillard
Author

Joseph F Roberts
Editor/Compiler

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An expanding collection of devotional writings

Publication and Credits

Devotional Reflections

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Author: W.A. Dillard

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Compiled from 159 supplied individual devotional writings and the complete 185-page book Thoughts on Discipleship. The original devotional pages, wording, Scripture quotations, and references are preserved as provided.

This compilation is prepared for continued expansion. Additional devotional writings may be added in future revisions.

Editor's Note

These devotional writings by W.A. Dillard are brought together for personal reading and study. The pieces address faith, Christian living, the understanding of Scripture, and the believer's response to God.

The devotionals are arranged alphabetically by their supplied titles. Each begins on a separate page. The original content has been retained without rewriting or correction; the title pages, this note, the Table of Contents, and continuous page numbers are editorial additions.

This is an expanding compilation. Additional writings can be appended to the collection, with the contents and pagination updated as the book grows.

Joseph F Roberts

Editor/Compiler

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101 THINGS TO DO

Recently on a trip out west, the two hours difference between Central and Pacific time found me up at about 5:30 as usual. The only problem: it was only 3:30 local time. Retreating to the small lobby of the quaint hotel in historic Groveland, CA, I saw a commercial paper on the coffee table entitled 101 THINGS TO DO IN THE YOSEMITE AREA. I read many of them with interest but failed to notice any reference to spiritual activities. Of course, that precipitated paper and pen.

Now in the life of most Americans, one may feel as though there are 1,001 things to do. Similarly, few, if any, of these may include spiritual activities. Does this not underscore a terribly skewed lifestyle? Inasmuch as one's approximate "threescore and ten" years on this terrestrial ball, compared to the endless ages to live beyond this brief journey, does it not make much more sense to live in continued preparation for that which is to come?

Certainly, one cannot escape many mundane demands in life, but to live as though this world were all there is to life is to play the role of a fool . . . who says in his heart, "There is no God; hence, no accountability to a higher power." This is the ultimate folly of men reputed to be educated and intelligent. Could it be that some are educated beyond their intelligence??

Solomon, the wisest man to walk these paths of life left no little information about what men should be pursuing in the brevity of their days. At the end of his writing in Ecclesiastes, he pungently summarized, *"Let us hear the conclusion of the matter: fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man."* Ecc. 12:13.

Common observation provides evidence that most men are derelict in their duty, not understanding that they will live for millions of timeless years regretting it. So, 101 things to do, or 1,001 things to do, wisdom says: prioritize and see to it that personal repentance from sin and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is number ONE! Then living in discipleship to the Savior is to follow consistently. Whatever else is left to do is of little consequence in the scheme of things. Doubtless, readers have many things to do. Now, what about priority? Each person really is on this planet for specific purposes. Understanding that, let the wisdom of Solomon be heard and heeded!

FOR THOUGHT: The songwriter penned, "It's a long, long time from May to December, but the days grow short when you reach September." The swiftness of time finds all but those who are wise nearing the end of earthly life with days consumed with 101 things to do. How many of those 101 things are given to spiritual readiness for eternity? May the cries of wisdom still find a hearing ear in today's society? Why? Why not?

A MENTAL CHALLENGE FROM GOD

All who take the name of Christ Jesus in salvation and discipleship are issued a distinct mental challenge from God. To ignore it is folly, incurring great loss. To take it up is to benefit in eternal reward. What is this mental challenge? It is to have the same mindset as Jesus did in His earthly ministry. Now wait! Don't you dare shut your mind down to this challenge under the puny excuse that you can't do that because you still live in the sinful flesh. God knows that! Furthermore, He is not playing mind games with His people. Let's think for a minute!

There is always an excuse for failure. He addressed that in Phil. 2: 3-4, but the biblical admonition is to overcome the excuses by dedication to the practices set forth in the grace and word of God. The apostle Paul appealed to the church at Philippi, and by application to the Lord's true churches throughout the age, to press forward in Christian maturity to fulfill both his joy, as well as the joy of the Master. He was specific in the challenge. Said he, if there be any consolation, comfort of love, fellowship of the Spirit, any compassion and mercies, they would fulfill his joy by being of one mind in these Christian qualities. The bottom line is concisely stated in Phil. 2:5, *"Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus."*

Consider then the exaltation/abasement of the God-man Jesus. He was in the form of God. He did not consider it robbery to be counted equal with God but did not seek a reputation for Himself. He took upon Himself the form of a slave and humbled Himself in obedience even to the death of the cross.

Folks can twist the scriptures of Philippians 2:1-5, as many do, and surely will, but they remain in their purity the inspired Word of God; a challenge to every Christian to, as Peter puts it, *"that ye should follow in his steps."* Still, many prefer to whine that they can't do that! It cramps their style. What can one say? Poor ole God! In His infinite wisdom He asks us to do what we cannot do even with His divine help. Doubtless, all of His people would do well to remember more of the inspired Word, such as *"Ye are bought with a price; therefore, glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's."*

Here then is the meaning and challenge of true Christianity. It is sad that in too many churches the main motivation is social instead of spiritual, and the whine may be often heard: "There is nothing to do at our church!" If that indeed be so, may I introduce you to biblical Christianity? God has a mental, and spiritual, challenge especially for you!

FOR THOUGHT: Men have made machines that are indeed a marvel, but how do they compare to humanity?

Does the Creator not know the capabilities of every person?

Do you think most Christians could surprise themselves if they allowed God to work through them instead of feeling all the responsibility was on them?

A QUESTION SEARCHING THE SOUL: “WHY?”

“To be or not to be” is not so much the question. Rather, it is “shall I increase or decrease?” Let me explain!

Fleshly ego is much like the stomach: it may get filled, but it is never satisfied. It must be oft repeated. Fleshly ego unleashed in the world of religion is no different to what it is in any other endeavor: it always seeks ascendancy, and soon the tail is wagging the dog. Let me illustrate. A preacher desiring to build his own little kingdom had a dream. In the dream he had a conversation with the Lord Who inquired what he wanted to do in his ministry. The preacher said he wanted to be blessed. The Lord asked, “Why?” He replied that he wanted to be a successful, fireball-type preacher that folks would love. The Lord asked, “Why?” The preacher then replied that he wanted to build a really large church. The Lord asked, “Why?” Befuddled with the repeated, pointed question, he awoke. Then he gave serious introspection to his purpose and calling.

The calling and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ is not a calling to personal ascendancy. Quite the opposite is denoted in the term “ministry.” Moreover, greatness in the sight of God is extremely different to that concept in the sight of men. John the Baptist met this issue head on when his disciples, perhaps a little jealous, expressed concern that Jesus, whom John had introduced, was becoming the focal point of activity rather than John. To this concern, John replied in poignant words that should fill the heart and mind of every modern-day minister: *“He must increase, but I must decrease”* John 3:30. Which of the apostles finished their course in spectacular material achievements? Who among them went out in flames of glory? To their credit, they accepted the decrease that He might be honored with the increase. Only the apostles John and Peter are known to have finished life in old age. John concluded earthly life in exile on Patmos, and still in an activity of enormous value, being used by God to give us the Revelation book of the New Testament.

So, what is important? It is not the size of a congregation being served. Neither is it the buildings built, but it is holding up the Head of the spiritual body, even Christ Jesus. One may plant, another water, but it is God who gives the increase, and the increase God gives is not measured in the number of bodies that fill the pews occasionally or the fatness of the offering plates. Rather, it is the harvest of souls in the new birth experience, and their growth in knowledge and grace in the faith once delivered to the saints. All else is vain simply because *“Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it....”* Psalm 127:1. Let it be forever settled then, “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

FOR THOUGHT: It is the common, natural tendency to ever increase one’s mastery, acceptability, service opportunities, etc., but how does this natural tendency square with John 3:30? How does it square with Luke 17:10? How do these verses of scripture harmonize with the love and zeal one finds in Christ? Explain!

A THOUSAND MILE JOURNEY

"The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord: and he delighteth in his way." Psalm 37:23.

It is said that a journey of one thousand miles begins with a single step. Continued increments of one step at a time will eventually get one to that goal. A recent study underscoring how many steps people in America take each day, actually measured by a pedometer revealed that men walk only slightly more steps each day than women do, on average. Men walked 5340 to women, 4912. Doing a little math based on the average stride of two and one-half feet per step, this amounts to a little over two and one-half miles per day. Given that as true, the thousand-mile journey would be completed in a little less than two years. Of course, these steps do not literally mean a straight-line journey or that they are taken toward a specific destination; rather they mean achievement of the affairs of daily life. If one is blessed with good health, many such journeys will be made. But wait! Think with me for a moment!

Whether one's physical steps be many or few is not nearly as important as how, and why they are made. Truly, the steps of the spiritual walk of life are what count both for time and eternity. This is why such great verses of scripture as 1 Peter 2:21 are recorded in Holy Writ: *"For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps:"* Underscore the last five words: Ye should follow his steps. How keen are my memories as a small lad following dad in the fields? Wherever dad's footprints were made in the sod were exactly where my feet also landed even if it required a jump. To be like dad was always the goal of the journey of so many footsteps. How easily those memories are recalled!

Extrapolate that into the all-important journey into eternity. A trip down memory lane allows one a sense of measurement of life. Footsteps are traceable and meaningful. Likewise, the footsteps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, David tells us in Psalm 37. Pause to look at those footprints. They began at the foot of the cross on Golgotha. Moreover, if they lead to the goals of life the Lord has ordered and exemplified, they lead consistently to a mature Christian, skilled in the Holy Word, one who will be richly rewarded in the Day of the Lord.

The new year is at hand, yet some may tend to recoil at the prospects of a thousand-mile journey but should not. After all, the spiritual journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step of a one-on-one meeting with Christ Jesus. Please take that step!

FOR THOUGHT: Of the many steps taken each day, how many do you suppose are taken that follow the footsteps of Jesus? Would the percentage be miniscule?

In a fast food, all things ready in an instant type of world, is it any wonder that the prospects of a "thousand-mile journey" spiritually brings discouragement? On the other hand, is it not true that the journey of life is the important thing to get right and enjoy?

A WAY TO KNOW

From the earliest of days, the Creator God of heaven and earth initiated incremental revelation of Himself to man. This process began in Genesis 2:4 where the first compound name of God appears as “LORD God” or in Hebrew “Jehovah-Elohim.” Jehovah or Yahweh as modern scholars like to transliterate that name, then becomes compounded with more than a dozen other names of God as he moves into various office works to fulfill the needs of fallen mankind in general, and His people in particular. This is also His name that He revealed to Moses upon his inquiry at the burning bush.

Thus, revelation of knowledge, from mundane things to salvation, and from acceptable service to the terms of eternal hope, becomes the innate outreach of God to men, and to His people of covenant in particular. He revealed to Cain and Abel how to make an acceptable, sacrificial offering; to Noah how to build and preserve an ark; to Abraham his plan to visit Sodom and Gomorrah with destruction. Notice His respect to the patriarch in Genesis 18:17-19. *“And the LORD said, ‘Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do; Seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him.’”*

God’s revelation of Himself continued to grow throughout the Old Testament to the ultimate expression of Himself in Jesus the Christ. Heb. 1:1-3. However, there is more to come. The fullness of the revelation of Christ Jesus is spoken of in the last book of the Bible in scenes yet to unfold: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ.”

The point is made that God has never been without a witness on earth. Furthermore, He has always seen to it that His witness has all of the knowledge of Him and His work and ways that are necessary for the completion of His overall plan with man. Agnostics and skeptics may decry the idea of such spiritual understanding, but that is their problem. God has consistently taken care of, and revealed needful knowledge to, His people of covenant since the call of Abraham over four thousand years ago. Indeed, the fullness of His revealed knowledge continues to reside in that context today. Note the testimony of Ephesians 3:9-12, *“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: In whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him.”*

So, there it is! The fullness of God’s truth is revealed and resident in the house of God which is the true church of God, the pillar and ground of the truth, I Tim 3:15. It is in this state of submissive discipleship that the Holy Spirit of God illuminates minds and hearts to His Word and Will. Do you want to understand more of what will affect you forever? Receive Jesus into your heart through repentance from sin, exercising faith in His cross work for you. Follow Him in scriptural baptism, then fellowship in a New Testament church as a practicing disciple. You will learn! You will know!

FOR THOUGHT: If the New Testament lays out God’s plan for His people, how will His will ever be known if the teachings of the New Testament are ignored?
Are spiritual things spiritually discerned?

ABOARD THE MISSIONS BUS: WHO IS DRIVING?

Having been asked several times a number of years ago about proper methods of mission endeavors, this writer authored a small booklet for group studies entitled: To The World We Go, which was published by Bogard Press. Although it did not experience great popularity, typical of most Bible based books, yet some still ask for a copy.

One of the features of the little book emphasizes the Bible model of doing mission work. Most often this comes into play in the process of a missionary and a sponsoring church joining together to promote and accomplish gospel work in a particular place, with prayerful hopes of an indigenous church being the ultimate result.

One strain on the Bible pattern is usually seen in a minister running up and down the country in search of a sponsoring church to give his work legitimacy as well as financial support.

In the aforementioned book, it is written, *"It is a sad state of affairs when a church will endorse their pastor to do mission work when he is inept at pastoral work, and they simply want to be rid of him. It is bad business also for a church to go out in search of a missionary simply because of the prestige of having one. It is an accident finding a place to happen when a missionary is running up and down the road looking for an endorsing church and one takes him on unaware of important background and circumstances."*

Many missionary/church relationship problems could be avoided if the New Testament model were more strictly followed. In Acts 13 it is revealed that the Holy Spirit called men to missionary service who were already busily engaged in Bible teaching. They were Spirit-filled and had the respect of the church of their membership. Their church, too, was zealous for the Word and for souls. Moreover, great unanimity prevailed because of the presence of God in the endeavor promoting mutual love and respect between the church and the ministers.

If missionaries and sponsoring churches have to part ways, it would be extremely well for any future connection with either of the two to be well known and understood. Be sure it is not the motivations of men, but the Spirit of God that is driving the missions bus!

FOR THOUGHT: How many mission failures can you recall that were due to parties unknown to each other joining forces?

What do you see as the Bible pattern for successful mission work?

Do you think there is any chance for a mission work to be fruitful if God is not in it? Why?

ABRAHAMIC COVENANT COMPREHENSIVE

"They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed." Romans 9:8.

Bible students find it most interesting to study the record of God's work with mankind as it unfolds in the form of covenants. They pour over them all. Some of these were targeted to a specific time and people, and the three that garners the most attention are the Abrahamic Covenant, the Law Covenant, and the Church (or New) Covenant. Unfortunately, many fall victim to the unspiritual and undiscerning writers whose purpose appears to be that of serving mammon through the sale of religious material. The pitfall is the lack of understanding of what the covenants are all about. Think with me for a minute.

The Abrahamic Covenant is viewed as the unconditional love of God for man by which he may be saved. The Law Covenant is viewed as the standard God will accept for a person to be saved, and the Church Covenant is viewed as the aggregate of all those who have availed themselves of the grace of God and are thus saved. All Three of these positions are so wrong!

The covenants are all, whether conditional or unconditional, made as agreements or contracts between God and His people. The children of Israel in Egyptian bondage were the people of God who had knowledge of, and enacted cries based on, the covenant made with Abraham. It was to them that the Law was given as a schoolmaster to bring them to a spiritual understanding and appreciation of God's manifestation as Christ and all that He taught as such. That brought them to the church covenant and its marvelous grace in spiritual maturity. But what about the initial covenant with the patriarch of faith: Abraham? He was God's man when He called him out of Ur of Chaldea. With Abraham, God enacted a covenant of faith to compass His work with man from the childhood stage, spiritually (law), to the mature son stage (church), by which a people would be prepared to rule and to reign with Him in the millennial kingdom. Paul makes much of this in his writings to the churches of Galatia and to the church at Rome.

When Christ returns and sets up the millennial kingdom using the spiritually mature saints to rule in it, all will be accomplished that he began to do in Abraham so long ago. What a joy then, to be, as Isaac was, a child NOT of the flesh, but of promise!

FOR THOUGHT: Do you see that the terms of the covenants (Abrahamic, Law, and Church) are basically not spirit salvation covenants, though all are predicated upon them. Rather they have to do with how to live life on earth that is pleasing to God and rewardable at His coming? If the law was our schoolmaster to bring us to the anointed, who is/are the anointed?

AIR-CONDITIONED CHRISTIANS

“And because iniquity shall abound , the love of many shall wax cold .” Matt. 24:12.

The past few decades of vaunted progress have given Adam’s race no few creature comforts, not the least of which is air conditioning. It is almost a necessity in southern parts of the country where high temperatures and equally high humidity send all who are able scurrying to the cool indoors. Of course, a very large crowd of Christians will endure extreme heat, humidity, rain, etc. for hours at a sporting event, but would never subject themselves to a short worship service if the air is not conditioned for comfort. This underscores the point I am attempting to make.

In the Hebrew Old Testament, the common word for “cold” as in lower temperatures is “qal.” Its Greek equivalent in the New Testament is “psucho”, which specifically refers to a lowering of temperature by the process of blowing or evaporation; the same thing as modern air conditioning. Metaphorically, it denotes a cooling of love, zeal, or desire for a thing, and names the responsible, causative agent: the abounding of iniquity. To be more specific, it is the individual reaction to the abundance of iniquity. What does this mean?

Iniquity is sin, to be sure, but a specific type of sin. The term means “no law” or “without law” and specifically to proceed in religious affairs not knowing, nor wanting to know, what the rules of God (His Word) teaches. In the vernacular it may be stated, “I know what I want to do, or believe, so don’t confuse me with the facts.”

It is sometimes difficult for New Testament church members to follow the plain teaching of the Word when others all around them make a loud claim to be Christian but have little to no regard for the Word. Such cooling for God, His Word, His church, is not a sudden turn of events, but a slow, consistent process. Discouragement pervades the psyche of the nominal Christian who is by virtue of spiritual immaturity, totally unsuited for pressure, ridicule, or persecution in any form. He then finds himself aligning more closely with the unfaithful and practitioners of iniquity: thus is he air-conditioned, getting cooler, colder, cold! One need not be highly intelligent to identify this as a current, widespread reality, but though it is happening as Jesus said it would, one does not have to be identified among the “many” in that process.

Consider that “God reacts to man as man reacts to God!” is indeed a true statement. Hear the apostle James, *“Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded.”* There is much joy and excitement in witnessing this age come to a close. Doubtlessly, but though troublesome and sometimes most stressful, this is the grandest time to be a knowledgeable Christian on the planet, but you can’t see it if you have waxed cold.

FOR THOUGHT: Is iniquity (everyone doing his own thing, religiously) the cooling agent affecting Christians, or is it their reaction to that iniquity? Explain what you mean?
Can you vocalize the stages of the cooling to cold process that grips many Christians?
How much do you think you are affected by the actions of others in your circle of friends?

ANCIENT COVENANTS REMAIN AND THEY MATTER

How beautiful is the Rainbow! Moreover, its importance is far greater than simply being esoteric. It reminds one of gigantic, divine promises: promises in covenantal terms of God dealing with man, and man dealing with man. Here are interesting concepts, parts of which have been willfully ignored and forgotten. Think with me for a moment!

In the destruction of the ungodly antediluvian world, eight humans were saved from the worldwide cataclysm of water. It was then up to Noah and his family to repopulate the earth, and in doing so, rebuild society on a more stable foundation, humanly speaking.

So, to give all ensuing generations unequivocal assurances that a hydraulic cataclysm would never again destroy all the inhabitants of earth, God put a rainbow in the clouds. Men still rejoice at the sight of it, and they remember that it is God's unconditional covenant with mankind that prevents a flood of water from ever again destroying all life on earth. The rainbow remains, and it matters!

But that is not all there is to the Noahic Covenant. Read about it in Genesis 9. God established a fear and dread of mankind upon the animal, fowl, and fish kingdoms. That fear and dread largely remains!

Additionally, God gave every living thing that moves upon the earth as a dietary selection for mankind, including herbs. Much to the emphatic disdain heaped upon this concept by P.E.T.A., and others of their stripe, this dietary selection remains.

But that, and more, much more, is included in the Noahic Covenant. God placed a societal cornerstone, enabling the progress of civilization and preventing its total corruption as before. That cornerstone is capital punishment. It is now a repugnant concept to modern society which prefers to wallow in progressive deterioration while calling it progress. Hear the words of that cornerstone: *"And surely your blood of your lives will I require; at the hand of every beast will I require it, and at the hand of man; at the hand of every man's brother will I require the life of man. Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man."* Genesis 9:5-6. Quite quickly, some will protest this; saying that we are no longer under the old law. But, friends, this was before the law by hundreds of years. It remains in effect as surely as does the promise of the rainbow. Every bleeding heart that says capital punishment is no deterrent to crime labels "Lie" to God's Word. You see, the rainbow of God's covenant is a coalition of the tenants mentioned in Genesis 9. Every one of them is in force today as they were then. Men may ignore them, but the judge of all the earth will call each man, state, and nation in every governmental form into judgment on the premise (among other things) of this rainbow covenant of remembrance that matters.

FOR THOUGHT: Name at least three things God set in the Noahic Covenant for the benefit of men throughout time.

Do you think these are respected by today's societies or largely ignored? Why?

What does history consistently teach will happen when God's covenants are ignored?

ANTEDILUVIAN LESSONS FOR MODERN SAINTS

All that we know about the antediluvian world is contained mostly in the first six chapters of the Bible. Yet, what a tremendous storehouse of lessons for modern saints may be found there. Think with me about one of them.

Genesis 5 presents proper names of the lineage, both of the sons of God and the sons of men, i.e., the lineage of Adam through Seth as the Sons of God, and the lineage of Cain as the sons of men.

Of the former, the last two men to die before the flood were Methuselah and Lamech, who both died in the same year the flood came upon the earth.

Since ancient names were most meaningful, special attention is paid to their definition, and to two or three specifically. Enoch (dedicated), the great grandfather of Noah, walked with God and God took him. He is one of two men in history who did not die but was translated. (Elijah was the other). Enoch knew much and was aware of the coming catastrophe. Consequently, he named his son, the longevity record holder, "Methuselah," which means "When he dies it will come." or, "When he dies, he will send it." Methuselah named his son Lamech (Powerful). He in turn named his son Noah (rest). Noah would give rest to the world from the awful, global wickedness that prevailed in that time.

Jesus adamantly prophesied that the wickedness of Noah's day would be the common motivation of life before His return. Note Matthew 24:39. It is almost unarguable today that the world is largely sensual and lawless, becoming more so as it increases in complexity.

The flood came upon the people unaware and in surprise. The result was global death to all except those in the Ark. But they were not without witness in Noah and his preaching while building the Ark, but they could not, would not, hear. In like manner, modern educational forces of evolution of species, and lauding of humanism and ecumenism are effectively marginalizing the message of Holy Writ, preparing the stage for what is to come.

It must be noted that Noah and his family were not the only saved people of his day. There were possibly thousands of infants who had not reached the age of accountability, plus a lot of folks who knew God nominally, but lived in accord with the wicked world to the losing of their life. Peter mentions that Jesus preached to them during the days His body was entombed. I Peter 3:20. Those who are wise pay attention to history. Millenniums of time do not erase its timely lessons.

FOR THOUGHT: What do you think may have been going on before the flood that is not going on now?

Do you see the world as becoming more sensual? More distant from Bible teachings?

Do you think there may be sins in society today that were not named in pre-flood days?

APOSTASY PORTRAYAL A DEADLY SIN

Warning the church of the Living God at Corinth, the beloved Apostle Paul called attention to the terrible failures of Israel in the wilderness wanderings. In I Cor. 10:4, he recalls a most intriguing and interesting phenomenon. A certain rock appeared wherever the Hebrews made camp, as though it were (because it was) following them. Now this was not an ordinary rock. Paul calls it a spiritual rock. Doubtless it appeared as a large hunk of stone to the Hebrews, but something was very different about this rock. Its story begins early in the Hebrew exodus from Egypt. It is first mentioned in Exodus 17:5-7. Moses was instructed to smite the rock which would produce water in abundance for the people.

Since that spiritual rock followed them, it is not known how many appearances it made or how many times the Hebrews took special note of it, or how many times they may have depended upon it for life-sustaining water. But it comes into significant play some forty years later as water was desperately needed, and the Hebrews were complaining because there was none. God's instruction to Moses now was different: *"Take the rod, and gather thou the assembly together, thou, and Aaron thy brother, and speak ye unto the rock before their eyes; and it shall give forth his water, and thou shalt bring forth to them water out of the rock: so, thou shalt give the congregation and their beasts drink."* Num. 20:8.

Most who are passingly familiar with the Bible know Moses and Aaron did not follow God's instructions, but in frustration with the people smote the rock twice. Yes, life-giving water flowed, but God was not sanctified in the eyes of the people, and it cost Aaron and Moses their lives.

That rock was not Jesus, but it was anointed (Christ is a Greek word that means anointed in English) of God to typify mighty things about Jesus. It showed, among other things, God's protection, solidarity, presence, and sustainment of life. What God has to give mankind is freely offered in Jesus, the Christ. He willingly died to give to all the water of everlasting life. He is with His people and will never forsake them: He is there! He never changes! Either He is one's life into the age of the ages, or that life shall be forfeited. Being once smitten, He will not be smitten again, but forgives all who call upon Him in repentance and faith.

The recipients of His righteous blood's cleansing that flowed from the smitten Anointed One commit a similar sin as Moses and Aaron when they claim they have become lost, and now must return to the Rock for a washing in His blood the second time. He will not be smitten again, but he may be spoken to in prayer and ..."if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." I John 1:9. Hallelujah! What a Rock is our Savior!

FOR THOUGHT: How does the anointed rock that followed the Hebrews in the desert parallel with the Anointed Son of God? Explain in your own words.

In the Old Testament, many things were anointed, but in the New Testament only two were. Can you identify those two?

ATTACHMENT TO DETACHMENT

Attachment to detachment; does this seem contradictory? To be sure, the words are opposite in meaning, but they are descriptive of a generation. Think with me for a moment!

Long, long ago, God forged a mighty nation of Hebrews enslaved in Egypt. He delivered them, blessed them, and brought them to the Promised Land. Extraordinary victories, great miracles, and provisions attributable only to God's blessings were embedded into minds and hearts, but Judges tells the repetitious story of the propensity of men to follow the flesh instead of God. "A new generation arose that knew not God." In another place, the prophet Isaiah said of them, *"But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear."* 59:2. Sadly, men have not changed!

Fast forward! Out of the deadly prosecutorial fires of the Inquisition, God delivered His people by opening up the Western Hemisphere in general, and America in particular, for their unparalleled freedom and growth. Through famine, wars, and civil turmoil, God blessed His churches in this new land. It was then that the god of this world laid plans to inundate the nation with material things far removed from its Gross National Product by printing script to direct faith to Caesar. Misled churches hailed this as blessings from above.

Simply put, it is easier and highly tempting to follow the dictates of the flesh. Soon, churches, which flourished briefly in inflated abundance, found that materialism had substituted God. Youth then failed to follow the faith of their fathers. Pulpits became filled with moderate preachers speaking to moderate congregations demanding the preachers become even more moderate. Services were scaled down. Revivals ceased. God was removed from public prayers and schools. Innocent lives were butchered on demand by the millions. Churches became even more moderate, bowing to a social agenda in an ever-losing battle for the attention of the masses. At last, some have awakened to ask why the rolls are full, but the pews are empty? It is the continuing last state of churches whose members are detached from the spirit and mission of the church. Oh, but those roll members are indeed attached. They are attached to their detachment, and few are open to change. Churches have offered men spiritual salvation and truth. But, in their panic of material debts, they gravitated to social programs, and now find themselves with nothing more to offer. Padlocks are not uncommon. What a crazy course of history! What foolish decisions by spiritual institutions! Is it possible for the detached to now become reattached? Probably not if Hebrews 6:1-6 means anything at all.

FOR THOUGHT: Do you see a generation attached to their detachment from the will and ways of God? If so, what do you think is the cause?

Does this article bring to mind the teaching of Jesus that no man can serve two masters?

BAPTISM OR BAPTISMS

In expressing the unity of the faith, Paul told the Ephesians, *“One Lord, one faith, one baptism...”* Eph. 4:5. But one reads in the scriptures about the baptism of the Spirit, water baptism of believers in Jesus, and the suffering of Jesus is referred to as a baptism. So just what does it mean to say “one baptism?”

The word “baptism” comes from the Greek word “baptizo”, which means to dip or plunge. It is consistently referred to as a total inundation so much so that it is also portrayed as a burial. There is a sense that anything one may immerse himself in could be called a baptism. This is how it is used with reference to the suffering of Jesus. He would be immersed in pain and suffering.

However, the mainstream, biblical context of the word references water baptism of a professed believer by the authority of a New Testament Church. The other main reference using that word is the baptism of the Holy Spirit that came upon the church on the day called Pentecost. So, how then is it to be referenced as one?

Some would have you believe that only Spirit baptism is important, and that occurs in the minute of one’s spiritual salvation. Not so! That line is pure universal church heresy. Still others would have you believe that Holy Spirit baptism can only occur AFTER water baptism, and that upon the select few who diligently implore the Holy Spirit to accommodate them. Not so! That is pure holy roller heresy!

The truth of the matter is settled in long ago typology in the Old Testament. When the Hebrews were freed from Egyptian slavery, they came out after applying the blood of the Passover Lamb. Then they were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea. Again, it was **IN THE CLOUD AND IN THE SEA**. It was a simultaneous thing. Baptism is an immersion in water. A cloud is water even though it was a manifestation of the Spirit of God. The Hebrews were completely immersed with walls of water about them, and the cloud of water, even the Spirit of God, over and about them.

Today when a professed believer is scripturally baptized, it is in water, but he is baptized to fellowship in the New Covenant, the practical expression of which is the New Testament Church where the baptism of the Holy Spirit abides and has, since Pentecost, in special office work. By this the obedient believer is enabled to be led to spiritual maturity. So, it all occurs at once, as the scriptures plainly state: “...one lord, one faith, one baptism.” Scriptural baptism lasts forever, it can never be repeated.

FOR THOUGHT: Do you see the ancient pattern foreshadowing New Testament life: first the Passover blood, then water and spirit baptism, then following God, being led by the Holy Spirit through the wilderness, across Jordan into the Promised Land? Did you notice that like salvation, baptism, once accomplished, cannot be repeated? Explain in your words why this is so.

BEWARE THE LION

Evil is referenced as a lion several times in the scriptures. One reference is late in the New Testament where it is written, *“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.”* I Peter 5:8. Another is early in the Old Testament where it is written: *“If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, **sin lieth at the door**. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.”* Genesis 4:7. Here the words “sin lieth at the door” references a crouching lion ready to spring upon his prey.

The Genesis reference is intriguing. These words were spoken to Cain before his sin of murder committed upon his brother Abel. The call was a call to repentance from sin, repentance toward God, and a dedication to walk in His ways. Even after a crime as terrible as Cain’s, there can be forgiveness, restitution to right living, and acceptance before God. We may not always understand this fully, but it certainly does magnify the glorious grace of our altogether wonderful God. But there is more. This verse is a stern warning that if repentance from evil deeds, and a dedication to walking in God’s Word and ways is absent, evil will spring upon such a one for it is always crouching down at the door desiring to spring upon the unrepentant Christian. *“Unto thee shall be his desire.”* Satan desires believers as he desired Peter that he might sift him as wheat. *“You shall rule over him”*, that is the case IF one does that which is right. In so doing Satan cannot spring upon God’s child as a roaring lion, but let that child turn from God and His ways, and Satan will have a field day, destroying his life and influence.

This, then, is the import of I Peter 5:8. It is a clear warning that no one should misunderstand. BE CAREFUL, BE VIGILANT. For how long? Always! Why? Because there is an adversary, and he is the devil. This adversary seeks to devour careless disciples because he despises them and all that they stand for as knowledgeable children of God. What will he do? He will bring trouble such as one thought not possible. He will cause things to happen that will literally destroy the influence of life, and if possible, cut the days of one’s life very short. In such destruction, he takes great delight. He is not compassionate. He has no conscience. However, he is patient enough to lead victims down a destructive path so gently that they may not realize he has led them off a cliff until they are irretrievably falling. How may one deal with this? Must one live in constant fear? No! Rather life should be lived in love with the sweet Savior, while shunning the very appearance of evil. In so doing the disciple will never experience the terror and loss inflicted by the lion.

FOR THOUGHT: Have you heard the roar of the disciple-hungry lion?

Why does he hate Christians so much?

What are some of the things the lion uses to attract nominal Christians to destruction?

What is the key to ruling over the lion? Explain.

BEYOND KNOWING: TRUSTING! (THE IMPORTANT MIXTURE OF FAITH)

“Let us therefore fear, lest a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it. For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it.” Hebrew 4:1-2.

How great is the good news from Divinity?! It is fraught with promises of wonderful things which God has for those who believe in Him and follow Him. The context of Hebrews Chapter Four necessitates the inclusion of the last few verses of Chapter Three. Here, ancient Israel is held up as an example of warning to modern day church saints. It speaks of the generation of Hebrews that came out of Egyptian bondage, but who refused to exercise faith in the promises of God, by which they were denied His rest, and the blessings of the Promised Land.

Notice the symbolism (1 Cor.10:1-11): Delivered by the blood; baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; traversing desert wasteland under the protection and provision of God to the Promised Land; crossing the Jordan River to enter the new land, and the new life which is there. Those symbols are recognized today as our deliverance by the blood, baptism in water to walk in newness of life; traversing the desert of this worldly life; crossing our Jordan of death to enter His rest and all of its attendant blessings.

So, the writer of Hebrews says that both they and us are recipients of the gospel (good news). *“But the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it.”* Then, the warning: *“Let us therefore fear...”* You see, it is one thing to be spiritually saved, and quite another to exercise faith in following God. The Hebrews were saved, baptized people, but died because of a lack of faith. The important phrase is *“...not being mixed with faith...”*

Today, there are a lot of people who are saved, but who are not hearing the Word with that all important mixture of faith. They are often regular church attenders, but church means little more than a civic club or a social event. Soon, such religious practices become dull, boring, and the probability of falling by the wayside looms imminent.

In the ancient language, “being mixed with” is a composite of two words, “together,” plus “to mingle or mix”. Let there be no misunderstanding of the lesson. Those who receive the promises are not those who simply hear them or can quote them only, but those who believe them with all their heart. With all of your Bible knowledge, do you have this underscored mixture of faith in the Word?

FOR THOUGHT: How hard does the Bible constrain your life in discipleship?

Do you see a parallel between Israel’s faithlessness in the wilderness and a lot of church members dealing with their journey through this world of endless temptations?

If you are a saved, scripturally baptized person fellowshiping in a New Testament church, do you realize you have help to strengthen faith that others outside do not, who are outside your fellowship?

How much do you see the Old Testament events relating to your personal life as a Christian? Explain.

BIAS VS. BOASTFUL

“But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God against themselves, being not baptized of him.” Luke 7:30.

The question arises from time to time, but recently more often: Is there bias in Baptist churches and literature against baptism? The question does not mean to indicate that Baptists are openly critical of, or disdainful of baptism, rather they tend to push it into the background or omit discussing it to avoid conflicting discussions with others not of their stripe. Think a minute!

One evidence is a lack of underscoring its significance from pulpits. Ministers may feel intimidated by former waves of heresy surrounding the ordinance resulting in ministers being labeled in unfavorable ways. That may not be the case, but whatever it is, there is a widespread toning down of its meaning, importance, and beauty.

Another evidence shows up in literature. The spiritual new birth is heavily emphasized, which is good, but to indicate that one has all that is important, or that there is full leadership accessibility of the Holy Spirit, in rebellion or neglect of divine instructions regarding proper baptism and subsequent fellowship in a true New Testament church, is to negate the very thrust of the New Testament itself. Whom do we fear, God or man? Whom do we seek to not offend by this subject, God or man?

When Baptists are biased against the joyful presentation of baptism are they ashamed of it, or do they think to win others by cunning deception in matters of truth? Baptism has long served as the door to church membership predicated on the new birth. If Baptists are not seeking to win folks to proper New Testament church membership, they are not ministering the New Testament purpose. The new birth is as old as Adam's sin in Eden, and while the New Covenant is predicated upon it, so was the Old Covenant as well. To fail in these matters is to fall into the practice of abandoning new believers to the clutches of heretical religious organizations as so many modern “evangelists” do.

It is important to emphasize the will of God for every new believer of the gospel. Pentecost is fundamentally important. There is an office work of the Holy Spirit to, and in, the Lord's church whose benefit the unbaptized, unchurched miss. If the ordinance were not absolutely important, it would not be the consistent teaching of the New Covenant. Let such scripture verses as Luke 7:30, Matt. 28:19, Acts 2:38, and Romans 6:1-5 be revisited and indelibly impressed in hearts and minds.

On the other hand, to be boastful tends to create carnal elitism. There is a thin line, but a definite line between a sense of thankfulness for one's understanding and blessings, and a sense of arrogance or superiority that one may have over another by supposed greater knowledge.

Then let us witness the full truth in love for the Lord and His purpose but be quick to attribute all of these things to the goodness of God which all may have who will believe and follow Him.

FOR THOUGHT: What do you think Luke 7:30 is teaching?

May one omit the first step in obedience, and still be obedient?

What or how much of the Bible is unimportant? If all is important, does that not include the ordinance of baptism? Where then is boasting?

BIBLE BOREDOM

Is it possible to actually become bored with the Bible? If the practice of the majority of folks who call themselves “Christian” is offered for an answer to the question, the answer would have to be a resounding “Yes!” No other book in history has been so widely owned and so seldom read! Think about it for a moment.

Multitudes of people who were raised in a “church” environment remember with fondness the Bible stories so attractive to children: Creation; Noah and the flood; King Solomon; Jonah and the whale; Daniel and the Lion’s Den; the three Hebrew children; and the Nativity of Jesus, etc. Too many of these folks joyfully received the arresting stories, then considered themselves Bible orientated, and closed the book forever, without realizing how inexhaustible the spiritual applications and meanings are, as well as the unbroken connection of them all. The knowledge, wisdom, and burning hope their messages implant with the rest of the Word are unparalleled in the human heart because they are spirit and they are life! The Psalmist declared, *“More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.”* Psalm 19:10. Ignorance of Holy Writ by those who take upon themselves the name of Christ Jesus is responsible for a myriad of heresies. By these things men are plunged into iniquity with the mistaken idea that because they mean well and are sincere, it must be pleasing to God. For some, when Bible study is suggested, it is received as a suggestion to take a dose of castor oil! Excuses of archaic words; ideas beyond understanding, lack of time to devote to it together with outright boredom quickly surface as just reasons to avoid it.

Even preachers ought to read the Bible! Several have been known to drop out of the ministry because in their assessment they have preached all the sermons they can find in it, and they are bored with their own repetition, and the shallowness of the T.V. preachers from which they copy sermons. They have forgotten 2 Timothy 2:15. The truth of the matter is spiritual anemia will consistently be the symptoms of Bible boredom. Moreover, the underscored truth is that the University of Christ Jesus offers the only unfathomable textbook, and it does not include a baccalaureate degree. The Bible still causes the most serious, and decades long, student to soar heavenward in rapture divine as its contents are prayerfully studied. For one to say that the Bible is boring may well express his honest assessment at the time, but it speaks volumes about the spirituality and lack of dedication to discipleship of that person... and ... it is not good!

FOR THOUGHT: When is the last time you observed someone being enthusiastic about the prospects of Bible study? Did it make you wonder about that person?

If something instilled moments of great joy in your heart and mind, would it not be repeatedly sought? Do you think the Bible is capable of doing just that?

Could it be that the joy of increased Bible knowledge subtly transforms the mind as Paul told the Romans in 12:1-3?

BIBLE ENRICHMENTS IN FIGURES OF SPEECH

“ And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables? He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given.” Matthew 13:10-11.

In every language known to mankind, there is no shortage of figures of speech that serve to color, emphasize, and deepen the points of thought being presented. The Bible, far from being an exception to this, is a repository of dozens of kinds, and multiple usages of practically all of them.

Unfortunately, many students of the Word have not been exposed to a survey of the Bible from a “figures of language” viewpoint. So, some chap will roar in negative reply that the Bible must always be interpreted literally. Really? So, the Bible says, “All flesh is grass.” What grass is your flesh: Bermuda or Zoysia, Johnson grass or Centipede? Obviously, a figure of speech is in play. Had “like” or “as” been employed, it would be a simile, but in the absence of those words the figure simply calls one thing another; hence, it is a metaphor.

It is impossible for this article to be inclusive of all the figures of speech in the Bible. But a few are offered as an encouragement to recognize them, and to appreciate them for their rich enhancement to understanding the vivid points under consideration.

Parable: a continued simile such as Matt. 13, the parable of the sower, etc.

Idiom: particular words or phrases such as “break bread” to indicate “eat a meal.”

Hyperbole: exaggeration. Of Saul and Jonathan, David said, “They were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions.” Again, David said, “Rivers of water run down mine eyes. . .” Psalm 119:136.

Omission: words or meaning are purposefully left out, but the meaning of them is obvious. “For John came neither eating nor drinking.” Note Matt. 11:18. Obviously John had to eat and drink to live, but “declining invitations to eat with others” is the sense understood in the omission.

Allegory: a continued metaphor as Paul so wonderfully stated in Galatians 4:24.

Oxymoron: an apparent contradiction of word meanings as wise-fool or as one might humorously say in modern times. “military intelligence.”

There are more, so many more that a course in Biblical Figures of Speech is offered in many liberal arts colleges, and theological schools. Figures of speech make ideas vivid, more understandable, and memorable. After all, that is what language is supposed to do. So, far from weakening the inference of an implication, it strengthens it, and enhances the success of both speaker and hearer in sharing ideas. Surely, the author of language provided for our understanding these marvelous figures which fill His Word, and which He used in His mission on earth. Their presence enhances one’s love of the Word!

FOR THOUGHT: Figures of speech enrich language and understanding, but sometimes they discreetly hide knowledge that must be acquired through faith. Do you think this is what Jesus meant when he answered the disciples’ question in Matthew 13:12?

Just how would the people to whom Jesus spoke understand the truth of His parables?

BIBLE TERMS REQUIRE PROPER UNDERSTANDING AND DISCRIMINATE USAGE

“For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle? So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? for ye shall speak into the air.” I Corinthians 14:8-9.

“I think I know what you mean, but that is not what you said.” So goes the common misspeaking or misunderstanding of daily communications. Using the right term is important, especially in matters of the Word. One such instance is the often confusing the terms, “spirit” and “soul.” But, for present consideration are the Greek terms “GE” (earth) and “COSMOS” (world) as translated in the Bible.

The term “Ge” is very different in both appearance and meaning from “Cosmos.” Yet, no small number of folks continue to use the terms interchangeably. This leads to misunderstandings, and bad theology.

In the Bible, the word “world” is most often used as the translation of “cosmos.” This is proper, and when reference is made to the planet on which we live, the Greek term from which the reference is translated will be “Ge.” The ancient Greek word “cosmos” references a working system designed to produce predictable results. Hence the universe of planetary bodies is referred to as a cosmos as it is a definite, predictable working pattern. The order of the world of men is a cosmos because it is framed on the predictable order of sin and death. A clock is a cosmos since it is a working system designed to produce predictable results. Additionally, they call that stuff women use to make themselves pretty “cosmetics.” That, too, is from cosmos because it transforms a female from an ordinary human being to a predictable system designed to attract the opposite sex. In summation, “world” is from “Cosmos.” It designates a system. It is not a designation of the planet earth.

As mentioned, there is a term designating the planet. It is “Ge.” Furthermore, that root word in its expansion gives us such words as “geology, geography, geometry, geophysics, Georgia,” etc., all having to do with the physiology of the planet.

Being discriminatory with words goes a long way toward eliminating confusion of ideas. It helps the speaker to think more precisely, and the audience to infer more properly what exactly has been implied, connoted, or denoted. Most of us would profit from a review of etymology (a study of root words, prefixes and suffixes). It would most likely stoke our love for our mother tongue as well as open pleasurable avenues of ideas not previously, personally known.

Upon hearing this detailed explanation, a student was asked, “Now do you understand the difference between “earth” and “world?” To this he replied, “Gee!” Oh, NO!!

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think the theology of some Bible teachers would change if they took a moment to study the terms in this article?

How does this affect your thinking of the point from which Christ stood as a lamb slain?

Does this help you make more sense out of the offer of eternal life in the Tree of Life in Eden?

BLINDERS ON-BLINDERS OFF

There are seeing folks who are blind, and there are blind folks who see! Pity the former, for there are none so blind as those who will not see. Their kind is described well in Acts 28:27, *“For the heart of this people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them.”* A common tactic of Satan is to instill fear of the unknown in the hearts of men and induce them to blind their own eyes to spiritual reality.

Memories of childhood recall times when dad had a mule or two for plowing and other domestic chores. To get one of them to cross a creek on a very sturdy bridge was tricky. Most of the time success was achieved only when blinders were applied, and the animal coaxed to follow its leader. The green pastures just ahead were obscured by the possible pitfalls. How many animals have perished in barn fires because panic caused them to perceive the structure offered more safety than passing through it to the outside. In cases such as these, blinders were a good thing, designed to save their lives, but spiritual blinders applied to men are designed to destroy life.

Moreover, men are not animals, but one cannot overlook the obvious parallel here. Needed are spiritual and moral blinders to evil, and opened eyes to truth. After all, the human mind is only good when it is as an operating parachute: OPEN! It is not unusual to hear men who aspire to high places of judgment vow to keep an open mind on matters that come before them. God can speak to an open mind, but Satan wants a blinder on as many as possible: he succeeds too often.

Jesus addressed this problem in Revelation, Chapter Three. He enjoined the church at Laodicea, and the rest of us as well, to apply eye salve that they might see; namely, the Word of God. Disseminating the Word, then, is a practical application of eye salve that the Holy Spirit will use to instill true sight. It may be called salt, or light, or eye salve, but it is the precious Word that is light and life to those who walk in darkness. Furthermore, the church of the Lord Jesus Christ remains under the obligation of the Great Commission, and the joy of seeing spiritual things should be more than enough to induce Christians to open their storehouses of knowledge to others in need of what they know and have, even if it should be in the face of criticism and opposition.

Heaven's knowledge is true. The hope it instills is more valuable than all the world could ever offer. Uniquely, these things were procured, and are offered in and by the Lord Jesus, the Christ. The truly, good news to a sin-burdened world is that He may be had by faith. “I once was blind, but now I see!”

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think that fear of the unknown makes people reluctant to find the Lord and the life He offers?

Are any lifestyles of this world worth holding while rejecting the Lord?

What was the eye salve Jesus enjoined the church of Laodicea to secure from Him?

BURY THE TAIL AND DON'T WRING THE NOSE!

One of my former pastors and seminary professors, Paul Goodwin, was fond of telling a story about a fellow who was bitten by a mad dog. As the story goes, he killed the dog, then buried it — all but the tail. Now and then when he thought about the pain and suffering he had encountered by being bitten, he would pull the dog out of the ground, beat it with a shovel, then bury it again — all but the tail.

The story illustrates so many issues of life. Adverse things happen. Unfortunate words are spoken. Hurt is incurred. The natural human reaction is to retaliate in kind. It is the old legal “eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” mentality which the people of God operated on while under the childhood covenant of law.

It is indisputably clear in the great Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7, that Jesus upped the ante of the code of life under grace. Moreover, He did not provide a veil or excuse for one to hide behind, but squarely leveled the bar at the doorstep of every individual who would follow Him. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that what He taught about discipleship is embedded in writing hundreds of years prior to His personal ministry on earth.

Consider the words of the wise man, Solomon. *“Surely the churning of milk bringeth forth butter, and the wringing of the nose bringeth forth blood: so the forcing of wrath bringeth forth strife.”* Prov. 30:33. Again, *“Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out: so where there is no talebearer, the strife ceaseth. As coals are to burning coals, and wood to fire; so is a contentious man to kindle strife.”* Prov. 26:20-21. May I further illustrate?

If one has offended someone, it is not up to a third party to apologize for him, which they cannot do anyway, but many try (are they trying to play one-upmanship or present themselves more holy?) If past offenses have been assigned to the vaults of time, then they are as a dead or sleeping dog. Surely wisdom dictates that they should be let lie. The opening of old wounds cannot change history and can do little more than stir up strife. Such matters call for the application of wisdom which if any lacks, he should ask of God rather than forge ahead in the heat of human emotions. God’s precious Word fully equips His followers, and it provides the common sense both of burying the dog and the tail, too, plus refraining from wringing the nose. Thank the Lord for this wisdom. May we all be blessed with grace to follow it.

FOR THOUGHT: Do you know of someone who simply could not forgive and forget, so they had to beat a “dead dog” repeatedly? Have you ever done this?
At what point in such a scenario as this does wisdom kick in?
How do you see Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount making application to this principle?

C N GLOVER'S FAVORITE STORY

Dr. C. N. Glover, one of three founders of Missionary Baptist Seminary in Little Rock, was a Baptist preacher filled with stories; sometimes practical; sometimes funny; sometimes both. He has been in heaven for many years now, but in his later years, it was my joy to travel with him, and to deliver lectures to seminaries and institutes in the American Baptist Association. A trip of several hours was not long enough for him to run out of stories. I have heard him tell this one more than once and deemed it to be one of his all-time favorites.

"The Baptist preacher was after farmer Jim to come to church. Jim never would come because he said he had nothing appropriate to wear. So, one day the preacher went to town and bought a new suit, shirt, tie, and shoes, and delivered them to Jim. He told the farmer that he no longer had an excuse, so he wanted him to be in church next Sunday.

Well, Sunday came and went, and there was no Jim. Next day, the preacher went to the farmer's house and inquired as to why he did not come to church since he had new clothes and shoes. It was then that Jim told the preacher that he got all dressed up in those new clothes and when he looked in the mirror, he looked so distinguished that he just went on down to the Presbyterian Church!"

The story always drew considerable laughter, especially in the inimitable way Conrad Glover could tell it. But the moral of the story is clear. Disciples cannot be bought. If they do not respond to "Thus saith the Lord," the response will be meaningless. Kudos to the preacher for helping farmer Jim, but it is always better to appeal to men on the basis of the eternal Word of the Lord. A response to that would have motivated farmer Jim to come to church with new clothes or not! Abraham told the rich man in hell who was concerned about his brothers, "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead." Luke 16:31.

Is there some similar excuse keeping many of our families and friends from worship services today? If so, encourage them with the Word of the Lord. Their proper response will result in new clothes per Jesus' promise Matt 6:31-33, including white robes of righteousness!

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think disciples may be bought?

What power in one's life will enable faithful discipleship?

Should God's people respond to the need of others in material things?

What excuse is acceptable to keep one from serving God?

CASTING CROWNS NECESSITATES CROWNS TO CAST

"Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him."
James 1:12.

Much is made of the subject of crowns in the pages of Holy Writ. The Old Testament uses the term to depict literal, circular headwear as symbols of authority and royalty. But as is common to the Old Testament, these are also symbolic of greater things. They are shadows of New Testament realities, the fullness of which is mainly yet future. Think with me for a moment!

New Testament references to crowns for the faithful people of God include: a crown of life, Rev. 2: 10; a crown of glory, 1 Peter 5:4; a crown of rejoicing, 1 Thess. 2: 19; a crown of righteousness, 2 Tim. 4:8; an incorruptible crown, 1 Cor. 9:25. Of course, there is also the crown of thorns, unique to the Lord Jesus at His crucifixion.

Here is the idea that the scriptures set forth: The New Testament term for crown is in the Greek, "Stephanous," and it literally means "that which surrounds." The New Testament usage of the idea is an extension of what is presented in Proverbs 17:6, "Children's children are the crown of old men ... " Children are not presented as beanies or caps for the head, but as the source of joy of life. Thus, the basic idea, "that which surrounds" (Stephanous), says those who live their life in subjection to God, and the teaching of His Holy Word will realize acute awareness in later life, as well as in the ages to come, of being surrounded with the meaning and sweetness of those things, and they will remain throughout the ages.

But will we have golden headwear as a symbol of those things to cast at the Savior's feet? It is not clear in the scriptures that this will be the case. The twenty-four elders cast their crowns before the Throne of God, but this is understood to be symbolic of honoring God as the one who alone made it possible for these things to be reality. Such literal honor we will always attribute to our God, beanie or no beanie.

However, Jesus wore a literal crown of thorns. Those thorns mean more than what they alone inflicted. They symbolize that our Loving Savior was surrounded with excruciating pain and suffering, even more than what might come from the literal puncture wounds. This crown symbolizes the great cost of the crowns His people may know in time and eternity; a status of life to cast in great, eternal joy before the Throne of God's great love and grace.

But casting crowns necessitates crowns to cast. Are you being true to His love, grace, and doctrines which will in the process of time produce such crowns?

FOR THOUGHT: At this point in your life, what do you consider to be your crown, that is, your chief joy?

How do you think crowns of life are acquired?

Do you believe you may enjoy more than one crown both in time and eternity? Why do you believe this?

CHALLENGE OF THE MUSTARD SEED?

It is nothing short of staggering! Jesus said if one had faith as a grain of mustard seed, he could remove mountains. Matt. 17:20. Now think with me for a minute about this.

The tiny mustard seed slips through the fingers of a closed fist, yet it may make a tree-like plant. The possibility is simple: God so programmed it to do so. Were the tiny mustard seed blessed with a brain, it would surely object to the prospect.

Animated, the mustard seed might say, "Do not plant me in the ground. It is cold, dark and lonely there, and I would not be happy." It may also offer, "To expect me to produce a mighty plant is ridiculous." Furthermore, it might offer, "Even if I did sprout, the chances are too great that a flood or drought would kill me, and if that were not enough, the sod is too hard to break, and even if I did, someone would step on me and that would be the end of that."

I submit that the success of the mustard seed lies in its absence of a brain, so it simply does what God programmed it to do. One cannot escape the idea that if the tiny mustard seed succeeds in such a mighty, formidable task, what could the Christian do who is resigned to follow the will of God? Regardless of the "mountains" of potential opposition, he would accomplish mighty things!

Dwelling on the subject at hand reminds one of an old story. It seems a tavern was to be built in a town that had always been dry. Christians in that town opposed it and called for a prayer rally. They asked God to intervene in the proposal. The next day, lightning struck the tavern then under construction and it burned down. The tavern owner filed a lawsuit against the town churches, declaring them responsible for his loss. The churches hired a lawyer and denied all responsibility. Responding to this unique case, the judge declared that regardless of how the case comes out, it is evident that the tavern owner believes in prayer and the churches do not.

Ouch! That is close enough to home to hurt! Yet, it illustrates human reaction in contrast to mustard seed programming.

But is it possible to have faith as a grain of mustard seed? Readers should consider the faith of Job in agony; of Daniel in the lion's den; of the three Hebrew children in the fiery furnace; of the church praying for imprisoned Peter; of Prisoner Paul in cold, wet shipwreck. If that is not enough, some time should be spent meditating on the eleventh chapter of Hebrews.

The apostle Peter walked on water so long as his attention was on Jesus, but the sad reality of modern-day saints is that they are like those other disciples on the sea that night: they never get out of the boat. ". . . *If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.*"

FOR THOUGHT: How profound is the "faith" of a mustard seed! Do you know of anyone possessing such faith? Have you prayed for it? Do you believe such faith would allow men to demonstrate it at will, without spiritual cause? Do you believe God hears the prayers of His people?

CHILDREN OF PROMISE

The first two thousand years of human history might well be called “the age of experimentation.” Will mankind left largely to himself seek after God and His will for his life? The obvious answer was, and is, “No!” Thus, it was proven through the Noahic Flood, and the subsequent Tower of Babel that, though many were doubtlessly saved people spiritually, their way was corrupt. It was then that God moved to implement a specific covenant relationship with His people. Abraham is the beginning of that line. He received a covenant of promise that is still in effect to this day. Although predicated upon the spiritual salvation relationship with God, the covenant has to do with the life of obedience to God His people are to live.

The apostle Paul taught the church at Rome, and the churches of Galatia about this special standing with God in the following terms: *“That is, they which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed.”* Romans 9:8. *“Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise.”* Gal. 4:28. Some would apply these scriptures to all who have repentantly received the Lord Jesus as their personal Savior, yet walk after the world, or worse, after the heresies of Satan’s promotion. These have no advantage over the antediluvian population or those who busied themselves with the Tower of Babel. Furthermore, the loss of the true meaning of life on earth is just as sure to those of that mindset.

Let the reader consider that God would not have Ishmael for His heir, but the child of God’s promise, Isaac. A temporary covenant of Law was enacted upon the children of Isaac that they might learn the awfulness of sin, preparing them for the next and last stage of the covenant relationship, the Anointed One’s body, the New Testament Church, purchased with the lifeblood of the Son of God. It is a covenant that will remain to give glory to God throughout the age and the worlds to come. It is the final form of God’s covenant with man, preparing a people to rule and to reign with Jesus in the fast-approaching millennial reign.

Men have sought to offer to God forms of legalism as His inheritance. Others have despised their heritage and sold out for worldly exaltation or temporary gain as Esau of old, losing something that cannot be regained, but it is the true church saints that constitute those to whom the beloved apostle said, “Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise.” Here, then, is the sweet possession of God’s true people on earth. Let it be cherished and never abandoned!

FOR THOUGHT: Do you understand that the “Children of Promise” involves heirship beyond, but predicated upon, the “born from above” relationship with God?

Do you see that this means many, many more people are born from above, who never walk with God in covenant relationship? How much more important then, do you see His church as a part of your life?

Do you see that salvation of the spirit of man, and salvation of the mind-life, though definitely connected, are two separate things?

CHRISTIAN STEWARDSHIP

“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.” I Cor. 16:2.

What responsibility does a Christian have in the use of his money? This is an oft asked question, especially in lessons and discussions of stewardship. It is asked because there are tangential extremes that invariably get thrown into the verbal mix.

In Old Testament times, God demanded a tenth of one's increase, even the first fruits of man, beast, the fields, orchards, and vineyards. Wealth or lack thereof was not taken into consideration, except in the offerings in which the poor could offer birds instead of beasts.

Under the New Testament era of grace, God's people have not received less, but more responsibility, all within the realm of maturity rather than demand.

But modern times have produced their own extremities. On one hand, some would have us to always study to boycott companies that sell what we need when those companies then use their money wrongly. I do not accept that responsibility unless the evil is blatant. I cannot be responsible for what others do with their money. I have enough trouble governing my own decisions.

On the other hand, one should be aware of his responsibility to use money wisely. It is hard to claim that there is no money for God's work when one is spending God's money for alcohol, tobacco, gambling, and other vices that are a blight on society. Moreover, what does the widow who gave her last two mites to the work of God say to us? Anything???

Furthermore, it is not the church super-structural programs, but the local, New Testament churches that should be the object of our concern in wise stewardship. The apostolic instruction to the Corinthians is, *“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.”* After all, it is not the tele-evangelist; the cooperative programs; or self-styled religious programs that visit you in the hospital, conduct funerals, deliver God's messages in sermon, song, Bible study, and in property maintenance commensurate to worship services. It is the local church which provides these ministries. It is worthy of the support of all its members, maintaining it is giving to God and accepted as such. Personally, I am careful about how I spend my money, and more careful how and where I give it!

FOR THOUGHT: Since believers are to do more under grace than required to do under law, does this include how one uses money as well?

Do you think the phrase “upon the first day of the week” alludes to giving to the church, or might it mean setting it aside for all benevolent purposes such as church, alms, etc.?

Do you think there are many who see church gifts as the end of their responsibility monetarily, thereby abandoning personal responsibility in other important areas of Christian life?

CHRISTMAS IS OVER — SO WHAT?

“ . . . what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness,” 2 Peter 3:11.

Long before it was a federal holiday, Christmas was! There are few scholars who actually believe that Jesus was born in December, but that has been accepted by both religious and secular worlds as the day to celebrate His grand arrival in Bethlehem. Some two thousand years have passed since the angelic announcement to shepherds in the night-time fields, and what is the common experience of celebrating that monumental event? There is much din and noise; tinsel and lights; crazy shopping; much food preparation; exchanging of gifts to one another; even a much greater outpouring of thoughts and gifts of a charitable nature; Christmas music fills the air, and the season evokes much partying, gaiety, and the like. The season brings exhilaration to some, and despondency to others.

Hey! Wait a minute!

The world has never accepted the reason for the season, but God's people have. But do they get lost in all of the above busyness? Post reflections of the holiday just past bring not only amazement of the holiday itself, but also of the thoughtless, humanly religious acts that characterize it. Such makes it appropriate to ask, Christmas is over – so what? If the whole idea of it is half as meaningful as it should be, it should evoke deep commitments. It should evoke repentance from sin and a personal commitment of life without reservation to the Creator God who became a man to do for us what none of the species could possibly do: succeed as the second Adam, overcoming sin, death, hell and the grave for all who accept Him as their personal substitute on the cross.

The very idea of Christmas should evoke a lifestyle of humility and thanksgiving accompanied by a benevolent spirit toward others, not just at Christmas time, but all year long. It should evoke a life of prayerful dedication to the cause for which He came; to become a continuous disciple in learning and living the faith once delivered to the saints in the church He established.

Furthermore, Christmas should evoke a readiness to do all within our realm of possibilities to help to fulfill the terms of the Great Commission He gave His church, stated in Matthew 28:18-20. It should evoke the spirit of Christmas in the best of biblical terms in our life all year long, and not just for a brief season.

Finally, it should evoke a desire and commitment to take up one space in the pews of worship every time the church meets to worship and thereby honor the Christ of Christmas. It should evoke an up-look in precious hope for His next soon appearance on this earth!

FOR THOUGHT: A lot has been written here about Christmas. What does it mean to you? Do you think the Bible presentation of the birth of Jesus and the modern celebrations of Christmas have much in common?

If one may focus on the birth of Jesus, then carry on without change, has it profited him at all?

CHURCH DISCIPLINE IS WHAT?

Words! They are our greatest means of communication, but they are often problematic. Words may mean one thing to a speaker or writer, and another thing to the hearer or reader. One may not properly infer what another has implied because often words leave out more than they contain. Add to that a language that allows the same thing to be worded a half dozen different ways, and the problem of misunderstanding is greatly increased. Job 36:10 records, *“He openeth also their ear to discipline, and commandeth that they return from iniquity.”* Now, consider the subject of church discipline as an example.

To the average churchgoer, church discipline means something harsh and drastic. It may be phrased as ex-communication; exclusion; defrocking (in the case of clergy), etc. It is generally understood as an action which includes a charge of offense; a failure on the part of the one charged to rectify that action; then an action taken to sever the active membership or privileges of the one so charged. Let's think more about this.

What is discipline? It is channeling behavior into the restrictions and benefits of a specified field of endeavor or way of life. Educational subjects are referred to as disciplines. Math is a discipline; science is a discipline, language is a discipline, etc. The object of those disciplines is to channel the thinking and understanding of a student into the unique laws of each to become a master of it. Hence, one disciplines himself to the unbending laws of addition, subtraction, etc. which are unerringly true. The arts are different, but each still has its uniqueness that demands discipline on behalf of the student; hence, the discipline of language, history, medicine, etc. A student of any discipline may be referred to as a disciple of that discipline. The early followers of Jesus were known as His disciples.

So, is a New Testament church a discipline? Indeed, it is! It is the pillar and ground of the truth; the faith once delivered to the saints. Saved people are admitted to membership in a church through the door of baptism. The ensuing fellowship in said church is likened more as a barracks where warriors are trained than as a hospital for sick saints.

So, rather than thinking of church discipline as punitive, it should be thought of as the restricting and benefiting doctrines of truth, and the general behavior of the membership as being in agreement with that truth. The true teachings of the New Testament are both positive and negative. The disciple is to learn, believe, and follow the positive teachings, while refraining from the negatives of sin, evil, and general wrongdoing.

Church actions of discipline must always be an affirmation (holding the line) of Bible teachings with a view of solidifying all of the membership within its restrictions and benefits. Consequently, a church action normally thought of as church discipline is really the church affirming its discipline, and its own discipleship in that discipline. Should there be offending, non-repenting parties to that discipline, the action of withdrawal from such parties is in order, only when restoration efforts fail. Such is punitive, but must also be enacted with a mournful heart, and prayerful hope of restoration of the offending parties to the New Testament discipline of the church.

FOR THOUGHT: Should not church discipline be thought of as a church disciplining itself by means of submitting itself to the constraints of specific New Testament teachings? If so, what should severing the membership of rebellious members be called? Have you ever witnessed or been a part of a church exercising discipline upon unrepentant, wayward members? What did you think then? What do you think now?

CHURCH DISCIPLINE IS WHAT??

(Part 2 of 2)

So, rather than thinking of church discipline as punitive, it should be thought of as the restricting and benefiting doctrines of truth, and the general behavior of the membership as being in agreement with that truth. The true teachings of the New Testament are both positive and negative. The disciple is to learn, believe, and follow the positive teachings while refraining from the negatives of sin, evil, and general wrongdoing. Church actions of discipline must always be an affirmation (holding the line) of Bible teachings with a view of solidifying all of the membership within its restrictions and benefits. Consequently, a church action normally thought of as church discipline is really the church affirming its discipline and its own discipleship in that discipline. Should there be offending, non-repenting parties to that discipline, the action of withdrawal from such parties is in order, only when restoration efforts fail. Such is punitive, but must also be enacted with a mournful heart, and prayerful hope of restoration of the offending parties to the New Testament discipline of the church.

There is no room for a holier-than-thou attitude in such action, nor of hot-headed, judgmental attitudes. Offending members of a church should be prayed for, visited, pleaded with to correct their ways into the discipline to which they agreed when becoming a member of the church. In short, if one is puffed up as were the Corinthians (I Cor. 5) over an incestuous affair among their members, they are not showing the maturity so necessary to corrective behavior. Mourning and prayer that one is straying from the blessed teachings that make a New Testament church precious is always the correct procedure. And, if punitive action is taken, it is not over! Petitions to God's throne of grace are to continue that He might bring the offending disciple(s) to repentance and restoration of membership with all of its responsibilities and privileges.

In the realization that there has no temptation taken anyone, but such as is common to man, those who are spiritual enough to bring gentle, but undiluted restoration to an offending party, must seriously consider themselves, lest they also be tempted.

One may consider if it is worth it since there are so many potential pitfalls. That thought is straight from the mind of man, and not of God. He teaches His church how to maintain behavior and to discipline itself to His teachings. To fail to do so would soon bring the demise of a New Testament church, as well as individual and corporate judgment from the Lord.

In 1964, an older soldier of the Cross, Dr. Chester Tulga, of the Conservative Baptist Association, addressed the church messengers at the meeting of the American Baptist Association in Chicago, Illinois. Among his many statements of wisdom, he cautioned the preachers about their dream of building a large church. He said that inevitably, a large church loses its power of discipline. When a church can no longer discipline itself to the New Testament, it is only a short time until it is no longer a true church, but a religious society devoid of the Spirit of God. Such is the fundamental importance of a New Testament church disciplining itself to the discipline known as the New Testament of our Lord and Savior, Jesus, the Christ.

FOR THOUGHT: A church that finds itself desperately needing to exercise discipline on an offending member should have an attitude of 1) indignance, 2) outright anger, or 3) sorrow and prayer?

Why do you think larger churches lose their power of disciplining themselves?

CHURCH PLANTING BY DECEPTION?

Romans 12:17b teaches God's people to *"provide things honest in the sight of all men."* Surely, it is unseemly to think of God's people doing anything other than just that. Yet, the procedures of some who profess to be the Lord's ministers appear to be less than honest. Let me explain.

A number of years ago I visited the Washington Cathedral in our nation's capital. It was an impressive structure with large, high rooms and halls that echoed sounds, and beautiful, artistic, stained glass windows, ornate woodwork and furnishings featuring a huge pipe organ. By asking repeatedly what denomination it belonged to, I was finally told in an air of annoyance that it was Episcopal, but that anyone was welcome to worship there. I did not doubt their hospitality, but now, at least I knew the theological spin that would emanate from its pulpit. Why was there a reluctance to be forthright about its affiliation when one would think they should have been as proud of that as they were the magnificent structure? Could it be that they perceived that the "nastiness" of doctrine, wherever advertised, separates people rather than bringing them together?

In recent years such has become a creeping trend in Baptist ranks as well. Preference is given to "Community Church" or some other neutral label under the pretense that "Baptist" references doctrine that turns people off. Proponents of such actions say they do not change their doctrinal views, and if one identifies himself as a Baptist to them, they will be quick to tell you how many Baptist people they have, and that they preach Baptist doctrine. Frankly, this writer has a hard time swallowing that. It seems some ministers are determined to build a little kingdom by deception and must believe that God will somehow bend the rules to approve their hard work. How can it be that folks can be wooed into a church of the non-denominational denomination, then have it sprung on them later that it is a Baptist church? Will God bless things that are not honest in the sight of all men?

Baptist churches have a glorious heritage and a legacy that is perpetuated from the first church Jesus started in Galilee some 2,000 years ago. It has sailed through bloody seas and horrible persecutions rather than recant who and what they were. What is the thinking, if it is thinking, that would motivate someone to deny all that, and still expect to have the commendation of the Master and the fellowship of the martyrs??? It seems some have forgotten that *"Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain."* Psalm 127:1.

FOR THOUGHT: What is one to make of churches resorting to attractive wording to conceal their doctrinal identity?

If this is done in close proximity to other churches, known by time honored name, holding to the same doctrines, is it not a signal of division?

Do you have confidence in a church planted by a man or would you rather be in a church God planted using His men? Explain?

Do you agree with the Bible that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Why? Why not?

CLERGY/LAITY NOT OF HOLY WRIT!

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Matthew 7:21.

In centuries past, some denominations began to reference church members in the extra-scriptural categories of clergy and laity. No such distinction is made in the New Testament. In fact, Jesus warned against such as it emulates the world in an authority structure. Matt. 20:26. But some will insist that they are lay members and think it strange such terms are not well received. One preacher readily agreed with the distinction, stating many members in his church were lay members: some lay here; some lay there, but mostly lay out.

On a more serious note, such distinctions have wrongly divided responsibilities. Folks in the pew believe being an inactive spectator is their rightful part in church activity (or inactivity). They think they are to leave the dissemination of the Word to the trained minister. Consequently, the average church member may show up at worship time, sometimes; sing with the congregation, put an offering in the plate, sit dutifully while the preacher presents his well-studied homily, then leave with an almost broken arm from patting himself on the back for being such a good Christian, perhaps uttering an occasional complaint because the preacher is attracting too few people.

Hummmm! This may be a little harsh, but I am certain that the Great Commission, Matthew 28:18-20, was not given to ministers, but to the church. Moreover, one cannot divorce a church from its membership; therefore, it is the responsibility of every member of the church to busy himself, according to his talents. Forget clergy/laity, the church is one. Every believer should awaken to the thrill of understanding Bible truth, and the joy of bringing others into the kingdom.

Biblically presented unity of the church does not include a church house! It does emphasize a living organism that Jesus is pleased to call His body. As a body, every member has specific duties in exalting the Head. This underscores something that too often appears to be missing—the personal, intimate, ongoing, living relationship of every member with the Head. It has been said, and I heartily concur, that the Lord’s church is not something one attends, rather it is a living body of which each bona fide member is an intricate part of on a twenty-four hour/seven-days per week basis!

Real Christians are true Bible teachers,
Long hours they give,
That lost souls might live,
Theirs is the playing field-- not the bleachers!

William A. Dillard

FOR THOUGHT: What did Jesus say one should do if he is to be considered great among the disciples?

Is there a bible injunction against calling any man “Father” spiritually?

What is your understanding of “Clergy?” “Layman?”

CONCEIVING COVENANT COST

Sanctification is a big word, and it has a big meaning. It denotes the setting aside of a person, place or thing for a specified purpose. Religiously, it denotes the holiness or state of being set aside or apart for the honor and glory of God. But how is that practically accomplished? Let's think about it!

Since man is a threefold creature in the similitude of the Godhead, and since sin invaded all aspects of man's being, it remains that if anyone is saved, such salvation must address all three components of lost man's being. The spirit of man is saved and sealed in the "born from above" process of repentance from sin and trust in Christ Jesus as personal Savior. The mind is then being saved in learned discipleship. The body will not and cannot be saved until the resurrection and/or rapture. So, from the point of spiritual salvation to the grave, the quest is for the salvation of the mind-life through transformation wrought by the ingested Word. This Word is the covenant or contract God has made with mankind, which is ultimately expressed in this world as a true, New Testament church. That covenant comes with a tremendous price tag: the blood of the Son of God!

Modern times are now dominated by those who treat the tremendous covenant flippantly. The end of such action, though written, has yet to become reality. Thus does the writer of Hebrews speak in terms both stern and plain, *"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."* Heb. 10:28-31.

Saved, New Testament church members are sanctified by a covenant procured by the blood of the Son of God. To turn from it and/or to treat it flippantly is to incur the judgment of God, and to insure certain loss. It is worse than the punishment that fell on those who despised Moses' law. Christians awake! Realize what you have by being sanctified by the blood of the covenant! Cherish it! Live it! Love it! Honor it! It is holy, and its benefits are and may continue to be yours! The other path of life is simply too unthinkable!

FOR THOUGHT: When is the last time you heard it explained that men are threefold, lost in all three aspects of being, and must therefore be saved in each of those three?

Do you believe Hebrews 10:28-31 is directed to saved people of God? How then shall Christians who are flippant about faith fare at the Judgment Seat of Christ?

CONTENDING WITH THE DEVIL

The apostle Paul taught us by his instructions to the church at Ephesus, *"For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places."* However true this is, such wrestling may often lead directly to ill effects on one's flesh and blood. Throughout history, God's people have dealt with the devil, of necessity, and just to recall a few of those precious incidents brings renewed appreciation of the grace of God by which alone victory was won.

To be sure, Abel paid with his life for standing up for God's instructions about what is right. Noah learned what starting all over again on earth was all about. Abraham forfeited country and kin looking for a city not made with hands, which he found. Joseph knew the pains of rejection and imprisonment. Moses forfeited the treasures of Egypt and had to flee for his life. Elijah knew what it was to be on the government's most wanted list. Micaiah had to face in opposition, 400 false prophets, be assaulted and imprisoned. Jeremiah was cast into a mud pit. The three Hebrew children were cast into a fiery furnace, and Daniel into the lion's den. There is more, so very much more! Stephen was stoned to death, James slain with the sword, Peter imprisoned, Paul and Silas were beaten with many stripes and cast into prison when casting a demon out of a woman in Philippi. Later, Paul was stoned and thrown into a ditch in Derbe and Lystra.

The great Hall of Faith chapter, (Hebrews 11) concludes by mentioning so many others who were *"... stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect."* He then goes on to chide and to encourage us all by reminding us, *"Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin."* 12:4.

Easy religion is not God's way. His is the narrow path; the strait gate, and all who live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. Jesus did not come to bring peace, but a sword, setting family members against one another, and a person's chief enemy is too often those of his own household. Satan knows how to fight, and the Christian must be wise in dueling with him. Jude gave us the example of the archangel debating the devil over the body of Moses and stated that even he would not bring a railing accusation against him but rebuked him in the name of the Lord. Jude 1:9. So, the bottom line is still true: *"Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you."* James 4:7.

FOR THOUGHT: What chance does a mortal outside of Christ have to resist the supernatural power of the devil?

What chance does a Christian have to resist the devil?

Has not God in the flesh (Jesus) met him head-on and defeated him?

If He that is within the believer is greater than he that is in the world, why do you think so many Christians fail in spiritual battle?

CONTRADICTIONS? YES? NO?

There are times when one may wonder if Holy Writ supports a contradiction. Here is what is meant. Hebrews 10:26-27 states, *“For if we sin willfully 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.* Then, one may read in I John 1:9, *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”*

A student once asked, “Which way is it? If confession is made and sins are forgiven, then why is it said there is no more sacrifice for sin, but a fearful looking for judgment as a result of sins committed?” It may be rightly assumed that quite a number of people wonder the same thing. The writer of Hebrews speaks of a willful turning away from the truth of the faith once delivered to the saints to follow another path. If such a one understands the New Testament plan of living for the Lord and willfully rejects it, then what is it that would bring him back to it? There is no plan “B.” Those, so erring, will follow a path of iniquity which shall be devoured at the Judgment Seat of Christ. The Lord will not reward disobedience.

However, what the Apostle John points out is that all of us in our discipleship journey have to deal with sin. Such is not a rejection of the teaching of the Lord, but moral slips, unbecoming speech, disrespect for others, sins of omission as well as commission that should be repented of daily. In such cases, the Lord is always ready to forgive and to heal His dear children. On this basis, the true Christian will walk in the light as He is in the light and know all the wonderful benefits of life mentioned in I John 1:7.

Is there a contradiction in the Word? Absolutely not, far from it. Trust it fully and know the peace it brings!

FOR THOUGHT: Name some of the common sins Christians commit. Do you believe these should be repented of on a daily basis?

If they are not repented of, what will happen when the believer stands before Jesus?

Do you understand the absence of contradiction between Hebrews 10: 26-27 and John 1:9?

Could you help others to understand this?

CRYBABY LOSERS ON RECKONING DAY

In the world of Christian discipleship there are as many classes of folks as there are fruit producers in the parable of the seed and the sower, Matthew 13:2-8. The lifestyle of these folks parallel the seed effects falling on the wayside, in stony ground, among thorns, and in fertile soil. The latter ones are blessed beyond imagination whether they fit into the thirty, sixty, or hundredfold producers. The former categories forecast the sad state of those who choose another way of life than that which is produced by the nourished seed of faith. In attempts of self-justification, they may point to failure to understand, and blame the forces of evil (birds) for snatching away their opportunity to understand wondrous truths. But the inescapable truth is that it was they who refused to open their heart and mind to the Bible. Then there are those whose lives reflect no depth of root and are scorched by the pressures of a sinful world.

Finally, there are those who will not properly deal with the social concerns, financial opportunities and other pressures of life promoted by the flesh, and who, as a result, miserably fail in discipleship. It just seems easier to give in to the world than do the proverbial paddling upstream of Christian discipline. Such as these do have a long lineage; a primary example of which is ancient Esau. To Esau, the things that could be his in the future paled in comparison to what he could have in the present, even if it was just a bowl of soup. He was hungry! So, why worry about pie in the sky when there is steak on the ground? Esau thus lost his birthright: a double portion of his father's goods. He also lost out in the blessings of life that patriarchs were empowered to confer on their offspring. Upon realization of his miserable failure, Esau, saddened and enraged, lamented much, but to no avail. Crybaby projections are so unflattering and useless in foolish adults!

So, let all be warned. The scriptures do not say what they say in vain. The writer of Hebrews states quite forcefully that churches should be aware of the spiritual condition of their members to ensure their spiritual well-being. He said we should look diligently, *"Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears."* Hebrews 12:17.

Some may be repulsed by this in the belief that reward is not to be gained or lost, but such an idea is foreign, even opposed to the scriptures. The Judgment Seat of Christ is for Christians, I Cor. 3:9-15. John's admonition to avoid loss is to God's people. 2 John 1:8. Let us not live so as to be Crybaby Losers on Reckoning Day! Judging the present state of "Christianity," by standards of the Word, there will be plenty of them.

FOR THOUGHT: What, in your own words, is a crybaby loser on reckoning day? Who is the crybaby? What is the reckoning day?
How many Biblical crybabies can you identify that are recorded in the Bible?
What may a Christian do to avoid becoming a spiritual crybaby?

CULTURAL CHRISTIANS

“And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?” Luke 6:46.

The President of the United States of America boldly stated in international media that the United States is not a “Christian country!” To a generation largely ignorant of history, he lauded the (unfounded) contributions to our advancement by Muslim nations. There is outcry, but not loud, and not long. As national foundations are made to crumble, one may still hear fainted laments, “But we are a Christian nation!” I submit to readers that while this great nation was founded on the Judeo-Christian teaching of Holy Writ, the definition of “Christian” by that holy book does not agree with the common, modern understanding of the word. This reality overwhelmingly reveals that “Christian” nowadays more pointedly means “Cultural Christian.” Think about it!

Churches of all types, brands, and contradictory doctrinal standing are accepted as “Christian” because they purport to hold to the historical fact that a man named Jesus came as the Son of God into the world and was crucified on a Roman Cross. That certainly is a true historical and biblical fact but accepting that alone does not qualify a person or an institution to be a Christian, except in the cultural sense.

Cultural Christians believe without question that any church is Christian simply because it purports to be. Folks do whatever is necessary to be added to the membership rolls of the “church of their choice,” but care little about learning what it teaches or where it came from, let alone what Holy Writ declares. Attendance is largely limited to AME (Armistice Day, Mother’s Day, and Easter) attendees which qualifies them to boldly make their spurious claim. Cultural Christians find that such membership allows them to inflate claims of contributions for tax advantages. Moreover, it insulates them from the outreach of more evangelical disciples and gives them a false sense of security that they could not be in error due to the large numbers of educated people who have made similar decisions. Additionally, it affords them social, business, and recreational interaction at minimal costs.

Nowadays, humor may be extracted from the inability of young and old alike on the street being unable to answer important questions in civics, but let’s hope the questions do not turn to the Bible. Such would be disastrous, which, of course, it will be, when cultural Christianity is offered to the Master as being the real thing!

FOR THOUGHT: How would you define the difference between a Bible believing Christian and a cultural Christian? Which kind do you see mostly in your world?

If people enjoy being a culture Christian rather than a strict Bible believing Christian, what harm could it possibly bring to them? Explain!

CUT OFF YOUR HAND, PLUCK OUT YOUR EYE!

“And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.”
Matt. 5:29-30.

The idea and terms found in the verses above are also found in at least two other places in the gospels. They are deeply troubling and perplexing to some readers, and a real problem to those who adamantly insist on a literal interpretation of the Bible to the exclusion of all figures of speech.

Let it be settled that it is imperative for context to be strictly adhered to in proper interpretation of any written document, but especially of the Bible. The context of the Sermon on the Mount spoken by Jesus in Matthew chapters five through seven is clearly shown to be a church message. Matt. 5:1. It emphasizes the contrast of life under the Law of Moses with the New Testament Church Age of grace. It must be received and understood in that context. So, how does that help explain this?

An eye, foot, or hand of any human body is totally controlled by the brain. It is true that should the offending extremity be excised, it could no longer offend, but the brain would still be offending through the other extremities. So, it would seem logical that one should then just remove his head and that would stop the offense. But Jesus is saying that such removal as he teaches would allow that body to live and not be destroyed. It should also be observed that there are extremely few people in today's churches with one eye, hand, foot, etc. because those body members are removed due to offense. Maybe folks have gotten so good that they do not offend with their body members anymore, but then that is obviously not the case. Truly, some other type of body is under consideration.

In I Corinthians 12, Paul speaks of the church as the body of Christ, a body of many members: some as hands, feet, eyes, etc. So, since this is a church sermon, it is believed that Jesus is saying to His church body that they must, as a last resort, excise an offending member or else become guilty of acquiescent approval of such offense, thus destroying the entire body as a spiritual institution. In other words, church discipline is important!

Additionally, the “hell” referred to in these verses is a translation of the Greek, “Gehenna.” It literally names the city dump of Jerusalem where things of no intrinsic value were discarded. Here, it references a lost and un-rewarded life, which is to be discarded and burned at the judgment seat of Christ at His coming, wherein some will be saved, yet so as by fire. Note I Cor. 3:9-15. Does this elevate the value of Christian living in the body of Christ to you?

FOR THOUGHT: How could an offending body member destroy the entire body? Is such a possibility a new concept, unheard of before? Name some possible cases. Symbolically, in the spiritual world, a body member that will not be subject to the head (Jesus) destroys the body unless excised from it. Have you personally known of a church body exercising this sort of discipline? What did you think?

CUTTING THE CRUD!

"They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one." Romans 3:12.

Time, in conjunction with the second law of thermodynamics, (all things degenerate) creates a need for chemical help. Equipment, driveways, building exteriors, etc. all too soon sport a collection of what is commonly called crud. To meet the need, a chemical company produces and markets a product called "Crud Cutter." Properly applied, crud is removed, and things look clean and usable again. So, what does this have to do with spiritual things? Much! Think with me!

Satan, the fallen angel Lucifer, is a master crud applicator. The minds and hearts of men that are intended to honor and glorify God are, by his influence, turned inwardly to self, and to layer after layer of spiritual misinformation which can be described, among other things, as spiritual crud.

In blatant opposition to the Word, Satan brushes on the idea that there is some inherent good in all men. Bible truth cleans that crud presenting the stark reality that all have sinned, and there is none that doeth good, no, not one! Rom. 3:23, 3:12.

Another layer of crud is that if one's good works outweigh his bad works, he will by that determination be saved. The crud cleaner of the Word underscores salvation is by faith and not by works. Eph. 2:8-10.

More crud comes in the layer of salvation maintenance: live it or lose it. But the application of the Word leaves no place for that bit of misinformation. The plain truth shines through magnificently. The only salvation of the spirit of man is an everlasting salvation; hence, eternal, or everlasting life. John 3:16. God gives no other.

It does not stop here. Pick a subject of spiritual things and leave the Crud Cutter (the Word) on the shelf, and crud will reign as surely as it does in time on material things.

What then is the foundational truth that one must find beneath all the crud? It is a discernment of origin and destiny. The origin of the body of human beings is dust. In Genesis 3:19 God told Adam, "... for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." But the spirit of man that finds expression through the body is from a different origin to which it is to return. Expanding a little on that, Solomon wrote, *"Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God Who gave it."* Ecc. 12:7. In finality, He is the judge of all men. He will not be avoided by a single one. So, the crud cutter of the Word allows all to know how to experience terrestrial life successfully with all its attendant, eternal reward. What a never-failing crud cutter is the Word. Thus, then, did Solomon say, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man." Ecc. 12:13.

Goodbye crud!

FOR THOUGHT: What are some of the ways worldliness, even religious activity and doctrine may be considered spiritual crud?

What are the destinations of the body and the spirit? If this is true of every person, who then may be considered wise who does not properly deal with his spiritual condition?

DEATH IN THE POT

Elisha was a mighty prophet of God in ancient Israel, the successor of Elijah, and a worker of miracles among the people of his time. Some of his mighty works are recorded in 2 Kings 4. A dearth prevailed in Gilgal (rolling hill country) when Elijah visited the sons of the prophets there. At his command, a huge pot was prepared for pottage, sufficient to feed all the people. One of the food preparation workers went into the field to gather herbs and found a wild vine from which he gathered many gourds and shredded them into the pot. When served, the people could not eat the pottage. The gourds were poisonous and doubtless very bitter. They cried out that there was death in the pot. Elisha commanded that meal be cast into the pot then the pottage served. And so it was that the food was good, and all the people ate with no harm.

What a wonderful story! It finds ready application for men in every generation, and underscores information for every disciple. In a world of sin and degradation, there is almost always a spiritual dearth. Too many times, what is gathered to satisfy spiritual hunger is nothing more than certain death, because it is not of God, but of man, or worse, from Satan's recipe book. It may look, sound, and be offered as good, but in spiritual affairs nothing is good but that which comes from God. That which is unknown and wild is not to be trusted as a remedy and guide to satisfy spiritual hunger and to nourish disciples.

Therefore, Elijah ordered that meal (flour) be added to the pot, and then served to the people. It was then that they found no harm at all in the pottage. Flour is the substance of bread. Jesus said, "I am that bread of life," John 6:48. One may eat of the bread that Jesus gives, and find his hunger satisfied. In fact, He stated that those who do not eat of that bread of life have no part with Him. Unarguably, there is death in the pottage of this world, but Jesus, the bread of life, negates the effects of sin and of death by His own eternal righteousness imparted to all those who hear Him and follow His directions.

Surely, the tables of the world are laden for many banquets, but there is death in the pot. On the other hand, there is a banquet provided by the Lord Jesus that a man may eat thereof and live forever. Whose table are you feeding from? Are you confident that yours is a banquet of life, or is it a banquet of death, from the delicacies of the devil?

Jesus said, "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness for they shall be filled." Matt. 5:6. David said, "O taste and see that the LORD is good: Blessed is the man that trusteth in him." Psalm 34:8. At the Lord's banquet there is no death in the pot, only life, and that everlasting!

FOR THOUGHT: What specific spiritual points do you get after reading 2 Kings 4? Does the parallel between earthly pottage and spiritual food seem obvious to you? Why? Think about and list some reasons why worldly pottage is attractive to people.

DEBUNKING UNIVERSALIST INTERPRETATION OF I COR. 12

Since the days of the apostles, the Lord's New Testament Churches have understood a church is local, congregational in government, and having two offices: pastor and deacon, to aid it in carrying out the terms of the Great Commission. Matt. 28:18-20.

When severe and extended persecution was used as the excuse of some of the Lord's churches to abandon Him, and to marry the Roman Empire, they assumed the notion of a universal, visible church. Eventually, they created the Roman Catholic Church, from which came Eastern Orthodox churches, and later the Protestant churches. Initially, those churches which were Catholic, but severed from Rome, all believed and propagated the Universal Visible Church doctrine. That became a huge problem to newly formed Protestants, who realized they were now without authority to exercise the holy sacraments. In that environment, the Universal Invisible Church doctrine was born. It taught that baptism was not really important, certainly not a door to church membership, but that all who trusted in Christ became members in that moment, and by that action, become a member of the Universal Invisible Church.

Next, came the problem of finding support scriptures for such a teaching. They leaned heavily on I Cor. 12:13, *"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."*

The cunningness of the devil is still as sharp as it was in the Garden of Eden. What is this verse saying? The word "Spirit" is translated as "the third part of the Godhead," "the wind," as per John 3, and "attitude". The word is not capitalized in ancient manuscripts leaving context (as mostly always) the determining factor.

This verse is NOT supporting any notion of a universal, invisible church. Rather it speaks of the unity of a local body (as here, at Corinth) which is made possible by the great goodness and grace of God. Read then the term "Spirit" as "Attitude" or "state of mind." Those who come to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. Hence, the universal attitude of a born-again person is one of submission to the God who saved him. It is in that spirit or attitude that we are buried in water into the local body and rejoice to drink deeply of the marvelous truth taught by the abiding Spirit of God upon that local body of believers. One only needs to consider the rest of the chapter to see this position fully supported by Holy Writ, especially the meaning of verses 25-27.

Let us all be reminded that the obscuring of truth is still the biggest tool of Satan.

FOR THOUGHT: What is the difference between Universal Visible Church and Universal Invisible Church doctrines? Are either of these to be found in the Bible? Where?

The Bible does not contradict itself. If Jesus started a local, visible assembly, how can there be any other kind found in the scriptures? Where did such come from then?

DISCIPLES CANNOT BE BOUGHT BUT LEECHES ARE A DIME A DOZEN

“He answered and said unto them, Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.” Mark 7:6.

The actions of the Pharisees say much to the keen observer, as does the superficial friends in the parable of the prodigal. Think about it!

Many years ago, there were a number of colorful personalities in the American Baptist Association who would not hesitate to speak up, should that be warranted. For a number of years, the churches would be advised that there were X number of churches and missions on particular foreign fields which wanted to affiliate with the ABA. It was soon learned, however, that this was a ploy mainly to secure salaries and building funds from whomever would take them in, by men with unchanged hearts. When those funds were deemed insufficient, they were off, seeking another group to take them in. Churches soon learned that mission work cannot be bought, but leeches were a dime a dozen.

In Oklahoma, a group which had been founded and supported by a northern convention sent messengers to the Baptist General Assembly of Oklahoma seeking admission to the association. Of course, that made a lot of folks happy until the bottom line was revealed of how much money they needed if they were accepted. One of the colorful personalities that was initially made happy was disabled. He used crutches to move about. When something was not right, he would tap the floor often and hard with those crutches, and the observer knew he was about to speak in opposition to whatever was under discussion. At the referenced meeting, his joy turned to disdain as the dollar figure became an issue of fellowship. He was then heard to repeat, “Speckled bird; speckled bird!”

But history repeats itself so much, and often in slight variations. Today’s churches run hard after the world in efforts to fill the pews and coffers, not to mention bragging rights of how successful they are. But with a spiritually unqualified congregation, and the problems Satan is sure to inject, decisions are made that plunge once bride-qualified churches ever deeper into the throes of religious, social club philosophy. After all, they reason, one must get along no matter what principle or doctrine is to be abandoned. Someday there will be an awakening, a terrible awakening to the fact that disciples cannot be bought, but leeches are a dime a dozen!

FOR THOUGHT: Sometimes reality is far from pleasant. It is hard to think of some missionaries as being “professionally” that, moving about and aligning with whomever provides the most financial support. Have you ever encountered such a scenario at this? What did you think at the time? What do you think now?

Do you believe that the work of God must be carried out by honest believers whose bottom line is not a compensation package? Why? Why not?

DISCIPLESHIP: DUMBING DOWN OR WISING UP

A common castigation of educational processes in public schools is that of “dumbing down” the students when the challenges of modern times obviously call for wising up. By some accounts, the castigation appears to be true. One illustration of this is widespread inability to function in the real world. For instance, I am a tall individual who is often asked, “How tall are you?” My reply is “I am three foot, forty.” Almost all of the time I follow up (of necessity), “I am four-foot twenty-eight.” Still getting a blank look, I offer, “Actually, I am five-foot, sixteen.” Youngsters for the most part simply do not get it, and I have had business people say, “Please stop it. I cannot do the math.” What???? My family is a family of teachers. At least one of them was forthrightly told by her principal, “You will not teach algorithms in this school. Please stop teaching the times-table.” What???? A youngster’s report of a measurement to me was “23 inches and five marks.” What??? Fractions, their names and meaning are unknown! What??? On and on it goes, ad nauseam.

Obviously, modern days do not the millennium make, but technology has produced fantastic opportunities for Christian education and sharing. Study and research has never been easier or more accessible, but the benefit of those things remains a reality only for those who are spiritually prepared to appreciate them and to use them. In recent years, because of the abundance of materials available, this writer gave away most of his library, keeping only those rare and treasured works that are mostly irreplaceable. At the same time, he expanded his research capability and accessibility many times over online. Likewise, one would think that all those who take the name of the Lord in any degree of reverence would quickly excel in spiritual knowledge and ability. But such thinking would be wrong. Technology is wonderful, but it is no substitute for a personal relationship and fellowship with God.

Most within the umbrella name of Christianity are not wising up. They are dumbing down! Their excitement is in material things that fulfill their social desires, and in the acumen of leaders who frame their homilies psychologically to scratch itching ears. Spiritual blessings are equated to the number of people socially attracted, size of property, and/or financial flow; criteria that would elevate most non-Christian sects to the highest of “spiritual blessings.” “Who caused the walls of Jericho to fall down flat?” asked a Sunday school teacher, only to recoil in horror that several in her class disavowed anything to do with it, some offering alibis.

The time remaining until all will meet our maker; every tongue confessing, and every knee bowing is extremely short. It is not a time to dumb down, but a time to wise up!

FOR THOUGHT: Conservative, Bible teaching churches bemoan the abandonment of strict Bible preachments by a larger number of churches. Why do you think this is happening? Do you see a correlation between educational dumbing down in schools and abandonment of spiritual teaching among churches more highly favoring social issues? Do you think the church is supposed to evolve into a social club or hold fast the teaching of Jesus whom it purports to be Lord? Why?

DISCRIMINATION IN PRAYER SOLICITATIONS

The psalmist penned the most interesting words in Psalm 66:18. *“If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.”* Why is this so interesting? Think with me for a moment!

The effect connoted in the verse is the refusal of the Lord to hear a plea, prayer, or other appellation of worship. The cause of that effect is the petitioner’s regard for iniquity in his heart. Now most will quickly identify iniquity as wrongdoing, but it is one of many discriminating terms designating wrongdoing such as “transgression,” “trespass,” “sin,” and “iniquity.” Each of these terms has specific, unique meanings in addition to the general theme of wrongdoing. In this verse, “iniquity” was chosen specifically to convey what would cause prayers to go unheard. It is lawlessness or disregard for God’s Word (law) in favor of what one wishes to do or believe. In the world of religion, many have minds as concrete: profusely mixed up and profoundly set. They do not know or really care what God’s Word states and they do not want to be confused with facts. In the words of the apostle James, “Let not that man think he shall receive anything from the Lord.”

So, think about how this plays out practically in interpersonal relationships. At some point in time most everyone has trouble, sometimes severe trouble. They will issue a plea for others to pray for them and seem pleased that many people have committed to their cause in prayer, even across denominational lines. Are you thinking? Denominational lines and non-denominational lines are not meaningless. If one believes in baptismal regeneration, church salvation of the spirit of man, apostasy, or many other fundamental positions not supported by Holy Writ, then they are regarding in their heart what the Bible calls iniquity. This is not meant to be condemnatory, rather labeling things for what they are. If I want others to pray for me, I want the prayers of those who do not regard iniquity in their heart. The ears of God are open to a repentant sinner’s cry. He also hears the repentance of saved sinners gone astray as they seek to learn and follow His truth, but if one is satisfied with practicing theology contrary to the plain teaching of the Word, it is iniquity, and it is the height of folly to ask such a one to pray on your behalf. That prayer will not be heard!

FOR THOUGHT: Can you think of some other scriptures that teach us that the ears of the Lord are open to the righteous, but are closed to those who practice iniquity? Give a brief definition of “iniquity.” Name some religious teachings that are iniquitous. Does understanding this make a difference in how you view some churches?

“DO” AND “DO NOT” SPEAKS

“Not everyone 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.” Matthew 7:21.

The pathway of life is dotted with hundreds, even thousands, of folks whom we are privileged to meet. Without paying specific attention to it, impressions are tucked away in our minds regarding each one of them. Some of those impressions are the result of what people do, or how they act, or perhaps what they do not do. Such also are the impressions we make on others as a Christian. Jesus taught that “Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them” Matt. 7:21. We project ourselves vocally, but sometimes quietness is very powerful, too. There is an old expression so often proven to be true: actions speak louder than words. Lifestyle and words must match. If they do not, I think it was Emerson who once said, “How can I believe what you say when what you are keeps ringing in my ears?” How many times have the good things we do become marginalized by an insensitive (perceived hypocritical) line that succeeded only in building a wall that is difficult to overcome?

On the other hand, positive impressions may be made by what one does not do. To illustrate, my wife and I were en route to Australia a number of years ago. In Los Angeles, our airplane became incapacitated by a cracked windshield, creating a six-hour delay. Passengers grew most unhappy and vociferous about it. Upon boarding, there came an announcement to appease unhappy passengers that drinks were on the airline, as many as you want.

After a couple of hours into the flight, we were approached by a passenger who wanted to know if I were a “padre.” When asked why she would think such a thing, the reply was, “You two are the only ones on the plane not drinking.” That created the scenario for effective witnessing, and sure enough, we were among the few who could deplane in Honolulu without assistance, but several knew who we were and Whom we served.

Some feel they have not witnessed unless they have aggressively thrown up a righteous wall, but God can use quiet living within the harmony of His Word to create effective opportunities. If there is no immediate turning to the Lord by others, there is no failure. It is God Who does the winning. However, no one escapes being an impression in the minds of others. The choices we make, the things we do, and do not do, are a powerful part of that.

FOR THOUGHT: What do you think Jesus was emphasizing in Matthew 7:21?

Have others made you feel less a disciple of Jesus if you failed to positively witness to everyone you meet regardless of the circumstance?

Do you think there are times when the best witnessing is done by actions, or a lack of actions, rather than words? Recall a couple of such instances.

DO YOU UNDERSTAND?

From the early days of childhood, life revolves around the acquisition of the many things offered: knowledge, power, talents, material objects, love and acceptance, and the list goes on. Modern times make it possible for one to spend his allotted time on earth in pursuit of such things with no time left to enjoy whatever pleasure they seem to promise. Obviously, wise choices must be made. Careers are important, but there are things more important than careers. Think with me about this.

The grand intellectual commodities are known as knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. Quite naturally, Solomon had much to say regarding each one. In Proverbs 4:7 he said, *“Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding.”* So, working down from the top, the principal thing is wisdom. Wisdom is said to be the best application of understood knowledge. Wisdom, therefore, is intellectual exercise of acquired knowledge and understanding, and is dependent upon these being in place to be demonstrated. But just any old knowledge, and even the understanding of that knowledge may be acquired, and the person still be devoid of wisdom. After all, it was the lure of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil that became the downfall of the first couple and all of their posterity. Wisdom was not in play on that fateful day. So how may one excel in the grand acquisition of knowledge, understanding, and wisdom? Everyone should listen closely to the man to whom God gave wisdom more than any before him or any after him. Consider these words from him. *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge”* Prov. 1:7. *“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding.”* Proverbs 9:10.

God’s people are enjoined to be big believers in every word that proceeds forth from the mouth of God. But one cannot believe what he does not know. Consequently, the pursuit of the knowledge of God is primary, acquiring it is the acquisition of understanding, and the reverential fear of God is the beginning of the principal thing: wisdom.

In summary, Solomon said, *“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.”* Ecc. 12:13-14. This statement should send any rational person scurrying to the wisdom store. It is here for you!

Should any of God’s people lack wisdom, James 1:5 states, *“If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.”* The present world ever allures with false knowledge, false understanding, false wisdom, while that which is true remains the properties of God Who is pleased to impart these things to men on His own terms. The question in the title must be repeated: DO YOU UNDERSTAND?

FOR THOUGHT: Briefly define “Knowledge,” “Understanding,” “Wisdom.”

Why do you think a lot of Christians are short on these things?

How may one become a knowledgeable, understanding Christian?

Then how may that same person become a wise Christian?

DOCTRINES ARE NOT TAUGHT HERE!

Words do have specific meanings. Sometimes that meaning is more difficult than others to pin down (to the delight of lawyers), but the meaning is there. To assume the meaning of words may be embarrassing at least, to dangerous, and harmful at most. Think with me for a moment.

A young minister spent a considerable amount of time visiting patients in hospitals. Not being educated in medical terms or jargon, he often assumed the meaning of terms from the incomplete context of the conversation of others. Upon hearing a question asked about a person known to be seriously ill, "Is he lucid?", he assumed "lucid" meant unconscious or otherwise not aware of present surroundings. "Lucid" was a new term to him, and for a short time his perception of it was not "lucid." Of course, the term means just the opposite, that one is clearly aware of the present. So, what does this have to do with the present point?

More than once have I heard the ignorant affirmation, in church attendance invitations, "We do not teach doctrines here." Say what? "Doctrine" means "teaching." The misinformed person is actually saying, "We do not teach any teaching here." But, if no teaching of teachings goes on, then what do they teach, and how may a worship service teach nothing at all, and if they teach anything, they are indoctrinating.

To make matters worse, they are proudly ascribing that characteristic to a church which they think to be the Lord's church. Surely such a blatantly false statement should be more than enough for any nominally educated person to run in the opposite direction. The burden of this article is not to educate the heretics, but to wise up members of the Lord's true churches who may be wrongly affixing meaning to terms by assumption rather than a dictionary. The list of misuse could go on, but let it be sufficient to say that the churches of our altogether wonderful Lord have much to teach and are not misinformed nor afraid of the term "doctrine." The parting words of the Savior to His church included, "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." Matthew 28:20.

Paul told Timothy, "*Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt save thyself, and them that hear thee.*" I Tim. 4:16.

Blessed indeed are those who do not assume but search out what is solidly true. Blessed are those who frame words in the proper context and blessed are those who attend the church services similar to those where this writer is pastor. Doctrines will be taught here, and not sparingly!

FOR THOUGHT: What did Paul tell Timothy to pay attention to? Would doing so result in some very good things? What?

Why do you think "doctrine" has become a word to avoid by a lot of churches? May a church avoid doctrine and remain one of the Lord's churches? Why or how?

DRINKING SATANIC KOOL-AID

A few decades ago, a man of great charismatic personality with the common name of Jim Jones successfully allured about one thousand of his followers to the tropical, isolated jungle where they built a compound, encampment complete with airstrip. They were preparing themselves in isolation to be away from the world, and into the next life. As time went on, some became discontent, but were unable to leave. On examination by a party that included a congressman, the examining party was murdered as they attempted to leave and the population was given poison Kool-Aid to drink to usher them into the next life. A few days later, the camp was found with everyone dead.

From that dreadful event has come the expression, "Don't drink the Kool-Aid!" It reminds us of so many biblical warnings and admonitions regarding spiritual "Kool-Aid." From the Garden of Eden, the battle for the spirit and mind of man has constantly waged. From the "Kool-Aid" offered by the serpent to Adam and Eve, to the religious debate over what was right between Cain and Abel, to the ruination of the antediluvian world, and on to this very day, there has been no relenting of it. The decision weighs heavily on every individual: what to believe, how to proceed, what to do? The crux of these weighty matters suffers no small number of Kool-Aid vendors.

Ancient Israel knew mountainous onslaughts from the idol gods of the gentiles around them, bringing harsh and swift judgment from the Almighty upon them. From false religion, false doctrine, to "every man doing what was right in his own eyes" lessons of life were painfully, repeatedly learned. During His ministry on earth, Jesus warned His disciples to "beware the leaven of the Pharisees." Matthew 16:11-12. By this they understood that He referenced false doctrine (Kool-Aid!).

To facilitate ingesting the Kool-Aid, another form of it has been quite successfully sold. It is the idea that a layman, untrained theologically, cannot understand or rightly apply the teachings of the Word to his life. He must have professional help! Nothing could be farther from the truth. The Holy Spirit of God accompanies the Word of God, and anyone who desires to know the doctrines of the Bible shall know them. It does require that one be exposed to them. So, what are you waiting for? Open the Book! Read for yourself! Prayerfully seek God's help for your understanding, and then act on what He teaches you! There is no safety in numbers of people of any particular persuasion, and the flavors of Kool-Aid are multiplied. **DON'T DRINK THE KOOL-AID!**

FOR THOUGHT: How does poison Kool-Aid and false doctrine relate to each other?

Do you agree that some poison Kool-Aid (false doctrine) really sounds good, and is readily accepted by those who are largely ignorant of the Bible?

Think of, and list, some instances in the Bible where poison Kool-Aid was taken. What was the result?

DROSS ON THE CROWN JEWELS OF ENGLAND

“And I will turn my hand upon thee, and purely purge away thy dross, and take away all thy tin:” Isaiah 1:25.

The crown jewels of England are sometimes referenced as the wealth of stability to royalty, and in some measure, to the country itself. I suppose it may be compared to Fort Knox in the U.S. Most have seen pictures of the vast supply of gold bars in the vaults of Fort Knox, but have never been there to see it in reality. Although the currency of the U.S. is no longer backed by gold, its presence remains a stabilizing factor in the economy.

However, the crown jewels of England, while stored in the Tower of London under heavy guard and extremely thick walls, are treated differently. They are the possession of the state and are loaned to royalty for special events. As a matter of fact, pieces are often carried out for special purposes quite regularly.

It was the privilege of my wife and I to view a large display of those jewels. The occasion did not produce wonder or lust, rather amazement and some disappointment. Not being all that familiar with the precious metals and gems, their value could only be appreciated in the words of the guide. The five-to-eight pound crowns seemed extravagant nonsense, and so highly impractical. That certain crowns had been worn by ancient monarchs put some people in awe; to the rest of us it was, “So?” A virtual mountain of silver and gold would not have excited me too much. However, one thing was apparent: the pure content of silver and gold tarnished by an occasional film of dross. It was a reminder that, after all, those things are mere elements of this world, and they will pass away.

On the other hand, there is silver and gold that will not pass away. It is the silver and gold of a righteous life. Paul spoke to the church of the Living God at Corinth about this treasure in I Corinthians 3:16-19. It is the silver, gold, and precious stones that will survive the judgment fires of God in the day that all of us face: The Judgment Seat of Christ. In that day everything unrighteous will be the victim of Holy Fire, but what survives the fire is not wood, hay, stubble (unrighteous deeds) but gold, silver, and precious stones (righteous acts of life).

In that judgment fire another great benefit is realized. The gold, silver, and precious stones have all the dross removed, not for a little while to then recollect it, but forever. What a day that will be!

God made a promise to His people through the prophet Isaiah saying, *“And I will turn my hand upon thee, and purely purge away thy dross, and take away thy tin:”* While He spoke of things He would create on the condition of their repentance, He has made much greater and brighter promises to us concerning the day when He will take all our dross away! Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

FOR THOUGHT: Precious metals are recognized for their value, but do you pity a nation whose sense of wellbeing rests in the amount of such metals accumulated?

Outside of faith in Christ, do you believe men may labor for material wealth only to put it into bags with holes in it?

What kind of gold and silver did Jesus want His people to accumulate?

EASTER THOUGHTS

Why Easter? The question will leave one exhausted and confused by myriad explanations. Let's take a condensed look.

First, the name "Easter" is of various origins, including Anglo-Saxon, German and Latin. It alludes to the direction, east. In earlier times the general populace much more closely observed the sun and moon than they do today. The world was basically agricultural of necessity; hence, the importance of determining the certainty of planting time. It was after the northern spring equinox sun was determined. That meant that precise day when day and night were exactly the same length. So, the rising of the sun at a precise point on the horizon signaled the change from winter to spring.

Additionally, there were numerous mythological gods with names close to this word. In many segments of the world, they were worshipped as gods, goddesses of fertility and spring. The word is used one time in the Bible as a mistranslation of the word "Passover."

Secondly, how is Easter Sunday determined? It is the first Sunday, following the first full moon following the northern spring equinox. This lends credence to its ancient origin being attached to paganism and agriculture rather than a specific date commemorating the resurrection of Jesus, such as His birth is commemorated by a specific date, Dec. 25th.

Thirdly, what does it mean to us today? In the "Christian" world it is arguably the holiest of all holidays, commemorating the resurrection of Jesus. To a lesser number of true Christians who are more strict Bible believers, every Sunday is rightfully a commemoration of Jesus' resurrection. They are mindful of what Paul said to the churches of Galatia in 4:10-11.

Fourthly, did Jesus actually arise on the first day of the week? He did! But it must be remembered that Jewish days are counted from six o'clock to six o'clock p.m., which almost always genders the question of what day He was crucified. It was anytime following six o'clock Saturday evening (dawning of the next day.) Count backward to include three days and three nights, and you will have the answer.

While we may rightfully lament the silliness of a rabbit that lays colored eggs being emblematic of Easter to a lot of folks, I do hope and pray that the observance of the day will bring to their consciousness the real story of a crucified and risen Savior and the eternal life to be had in Him through repentance and faith.

FOR THOUGHT: Can you explain the origin of the word "Easter?" Explain how Easter Sunday is determined since it moves around on your calendar. What is more important to you, an annual day called Easter, or worship of the risen Christ each first day of the week?

EASTER, IS IT BIBLICAL?

"And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him; intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people." Acts 4:12.

It is Easter Sunday. So much about it is simply taken for granted. What is actually known about this day celebrated by the entire "Christian" world, and why is it so called? Moreover, how does one know when it is Easter Sunday, and why is it celebrated if it is not in the Bible? Please think with me for a moment!

The meaning of the word "Easter" is controversial. Most historians tend to credit one English monk of the 8th century A.D. with the earliest usage of the word in connection with Christianity. It is believed to be a carryover name of a mythical goddess worshipped by very early Anglo people, associated with feasts in the spring, especially in April. Also, the idea of fertility was associated with this goddess.

From the early dark age onward, the Roman Church often pre-opted pagan holidays, incorporating them into their church celebrations to gain their population. Regardless, the term has been stripped of any pagan meaning, and it has been designated "Resurrection Sunday" among Christians for hundreds of years. Perhaps the only remnant of pagan thought remaining may be found in the colored eggs (symbols of fertility), but the idea of a bunny (also a symbol of fertility to the ancients) laying such eggs is mind-blowing nonsense.

So, how does one know when it is Easter Sunday aside from being told so by others? It is determined by finding the first Sunday after the first full moon following the Spring equinox in the northern hemisphere. Readers will undoubtedly remember this formula forever! . . . not!

Finally, if it is not in the Bible, then why do I read "Easter" in Acts 12:4? The fact that English translations, especially KJV uses the word in Acts 12:4 is solid evidence that both the word and the holiday it designates had been long embedded in the minds of early translators of scriptures, especially such giants as William Tyndale and Wycliffe.

However, research of Bible languages will show that here "Easter" is given as a translation of the Greek and Hebrew terms for "Passover," (Paschal). Contextually, Peter had been imprisoned, and it was the intention of Herod to try him before the Jewish people following PASSOVER, (not Easter)!

Then, does it follow that it is wrong to recognize and celebrate Easter with the meaning presently attached to it? Not at all! In fact, it is always appropriate to celebrate the glorious resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is for this very reason that the Lord's churches meet on Sunday, the first day of the week. It is a long-held tradition from apostolic days, repeatedly honoring the resurrection of Jesus on the first day of the week.

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think more Christians celebrate Easter as a national holiday than as a memorial to Jesus' resurrection? What seems to be the emphasis in your community? Do you appreciate Sunday worship services as a specific memorial to Jesus' resurrection? Where do colored chickens, rabbits, and eggs fit into the idea of Easter?

ECUMENISM: RELIGION'S LOSING GAME

"And the Lord said, 'Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.' So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city." Genesis 11:6-8.

"Ecumenism," what is it, anyway? The word is basically Latin and means "the whole world" according to several dictionaries. Within the Christian context, it means the idea and/or the movement to bring all of the "Christian churches" in the world together as one. Protestants and most neo-Protestants see this as invisible and universal. Catholics largely see this as persuading all churches to return to the universal, visible Catholic fold from which they supposedly went astray. Baptists, on the other hand, know that Catholics originated by departing from them in the fourth century. They see it as rank heresy; religious baloney, to be avoided at all costs.

The history of ecumenism is interesting, but it is bad. The first ecumenical movement succeeded in society at large in the days of Noah. God destroyed the entire world as a result (except for those on the Ark, of course.) Natural men are sinful, fleshly and do not learn spiritual truths as those things can only be spiritually discerned. I Cor. 2:14. Soon, time after the flood found the whole populated world in another ecumenical movement at the Tower of Babel. To break it up, God created languages, and the population was segregated to the language they could understand. Accordingly, the language and scattering of the people created an effective separation which has served well until recent times.

Today, modern technology has all but eliminated the barrier of language. Additionally, modern transportation allows men to be global in bodily presence in only a few hours. Communications are global and instant, and for many years world leaders have been working consistently on a "New World (ecumenical) Order." It is intended to be ecumenical politically, economically, and religiously. So, nations march steadily onward toward that goal purported to be the apex of man's existence, but apart from his Creator, and in the abandonment of the very idea of individualism and exceptionalism.

All of this does not bode well for the nations, but it is their determined goal. Still the Creator's clarion call to all who will hear Him is to "come out from among them and be ye separate saith the Lord." 2 Cor. 6:17. Baptist churches stand or fall on their understanding and treatment of the Word. For them ecumenism offers nothing to gain, and everything to lose. They have stood on God's truth while Catholic, Protestant and Neo-protestants rejected their message to go their own way. Doubtless, it will be increasingly harder to stand for the true principles of God's Word, but by the grace of God some will, and I desire for you and me to be in that number.

FOR THOUGHT: Have you heard ecumenism more positively supported than not? What do you think the world hopes to gain in an ecumenical movement? What do you think some churches hope to gain by it? Do you see it in light of history, in light of God's Word? When the pressure of ecumenism grows very strong do you think you will be able to resist it? How?

ESTEEM EVERY MAN A LIAR

From the pages of Holy Writ comes what some would consider startling statements. Indeed, the original languages of the Bible are very strong. They do not mince words or leave gaping holes of misunderstanding. Often, they are downright offensive to natural man, and especially so to those who choose to live self-righteously. Think with me for a moment!

In Romans Paul tells of the knowledge advantage of the Jewish people since they had been the covenant people of God. But what if some of them chose to not believe the oracles of God? Would that make the faith of God to be without effect? His conclusion is *“God forbid: yea, let God be true, but every man a liar; as it is written, That thou mightest be justified in thy sayings, and mightest overcome when thou art judged.”* Romans 3:4.

Self-righteous folks are indeed greatly offended at the prospect of being considered a liar, but this is an indictment against all men, not just the self-righteous. Moreover, this is a personal judgment call, not a prosecutorial one. The Bible does not encourage in any way overt, railing accusations regardless of from whom to whom. What is under consideration is the way the testimonies of others are received and judged in one's own mind.

It is here that Biblical warnings rush to the forefront. Such sayings as those of Solomon, who said, “There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof is the ways of death.” Prov. 14:12. Then the warning of the Apostle John flashes, not every spirit is from God. “Try the spirits from whence they come.” I John 4:1.

In these latter times, men have been conditioned to leave things to the professionals. Since they have invested a lifetime of study and experience, they must know and are to be trusted. Think what this means!

In spiritual matters, not some, but ALL have sinned and come short of the glory of God. In this state, sincerity is not excusable. Men are blinded to spiritual truth and their most sincere desire will not substitute for the Word of God. So, whom does one trust, the wearer of fig leaves or the Lamb Who provides clothing of righteousness?

Earthly family may care for you as no other, but when it comes to the eternal verities that affect the never-dying soul, there is only one source trustworthy as equipment for eternity, and as sustainment in judgment. The word of any person is only good and profitable as it coincides with the Word that shall not pass away. As the beloved apostle put it, “. . . yea, let God be true, but every man a liar; as it is written, That thou mightest be justified in thy sayings, and mightest overcome when thou art judged.” Romans 3:4.

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think the evaluation of every man as a liar in comparison to the Bible is too strong or too harsh? Why?

If this evaluation is absolutely true, why do men prefer the preachments of men when those preachments conflict with the Bible? Does not compromising the Bible make it a liar?

Your individual evaluation of these things is vitally important to your well-being.

EVER CHANGING, EVER THE SAME

Not by a thousand miles am I the only one whose ears are dull of hearing, and whose belief system is drained by the platitudes of modern politicians repeating the theme of “change.” “Change” is the premiere political word from local to the national scene. Followers appear energized by the prospect, and voters have been swept up in the frenzy of potential difference. But as the old saying goes, the more things change, the more they stay the same!

One may smile and pass off the illustrious promises of the political world, but truly troubling is when church rolls are swelled by those who have experienced no change. Change in the heart of men is not just good advice, or acceptable theology. It is absolutely essential. One cannot expect to go to heaven at physical death unless there has been a change in his heart. Jesus said that whosoever would fall on the stone (Himself) would be broken, but on whomsoever it fell, it would grind him to powder. Either way effects change, but the latter is not to be desired. His teaching here and elsewhere emphasizes the absolute necessity of change. Repentance, genuine sorrow over the presence of sin, is still a key word in a spiritual relationship with the Creator/Redeemer.

Christianity really is confusing and boring all at the same time where there is no personal change. Churches often yield to the whims of men rather than the strong, plain teaching of the scriptures through pressures from members who are unchanged. Challenges that arise from the craftiness of Satan sometimes tear churches apart because too many of the members have not experienced change. Congregations are turned from the prime directives of the Word to pleasing themselves and/or the community around them due to the absence of change. Where an ongoing, personal relationship with God is absent or starved for nourishment, a weakened church is evident, and if not corrected, it may cease to exist as a spiritual institution of God.

Then let all who claim the name of the Lord Jesus Christ join in the immortal words of John Newton as a real, living testimony, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me; I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.” Let that change, initially found in faith in Christ Jesus, go on to know (see) the truth that will make the holder of it to be free, John 8:32. Receiving the Holy Word of God as one’s final rule of faith and practice effects change! Rom 12:1-3. In that state, things are never the same, but always exciting in the inexhaustible growth offerings of the Word!

FOR THOUGHT: Do the platitudes of pandering politicians induce skepticism in your thinking? Could it be that multiplied religious philosophies bring the same effect to some lost people? What and where is the power of actual change in human life? Is there any other place or way than that presented in the New Testament? If you think “Yes,” what is it? Have you found that faith in Christ actually does bring change to your heart and life? Why do you think some find it to be more of the same rather than genuine change?

FATHER OF MODERN SUNDAY SCHOOL

“But Jesus called them unto him, and said, “Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God.” Luke 18:16.

While it is impossible to know just when the first Sunday School was held, one Robert Raikes is credited as being the founder of it. It is interesting as to how it came about. Think with me for a moment.

Robert Raikes was born on September 14, 1736 in the city of Gloucester, England. He worked with his father in his print shop and took it over when his father died. He became a fairly wealthy philanthropist who himself had 3 sons and 7 daughters.

Adults died early in those days, then the plague took an even greater toll. Orphans were everywhere. They never had the privilege of formal education, having to work 12 hours or more each day in order to survive. Many worked in coal, and other difficult manual labor jobs for a pittance of pay. On Sundays, their only day off, they would fill the streets, get into fights, steal, and disturb. In those days there were no public schools in England.

Robert Raikes enlisted the help of a clergy friend, and they determined to establish a Sunday School. It was not as Sunday Schools are thought of today. It was all day long. In the morning math and reading were taught, then the rest of the day was spent teaching Bible lessons.

At first, only a few attended because they lived in abject poverty, wore very poor clothing, and were often dirty. Robert Raikes let it be known that all that was required was a clean face and combed hair, plus they would get something to eat. Clothes did not matter. Soon his Sunday School numbered 100 or more. As he printed news of it in his newspaper, The Gloucester Journal, other Sunday Schools began to spring up around the country. Robert Raikes died in 1811, but by 1831 over a million children were attending Sunday Schools in England.

It was this writer's privilege to visit Gloucester a number of years ago, and to have lunch in a restaurant that was one of the buildings used in that early endeavor. Centuries have come and gone, and multiplied millions of children have benefited from Sunday School, where they learned of the Lord Jesus, and came to know Him in salvation. Great is the reward of those who bring the children to Him! Thank you, Robert Raikes, and all who have stepped up to the plate!

FOR THOUGHT: Did you know that Sunday School is relatively new to church ministry, and that it started in England?

Reflecting on your own Sunday School experience as a child, was it, and is it, still a spiritual blessing to you? How?

FIRST THINGS FIRST, THE FIRST AND GREATEST COMMANDMENT

“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. This is the first and great commandment.’” Matthew 22:37-38.

In the din and noise of the Christmas season, one often finds his focus shifted away from the reason for the season to the commerce of it all. True churches of the Lord do not celebrate Christmas any more than they celebrate Easter. But these days are recognized as federal holidays intended to honor the Christ of our salvation, and to some extent we are carried along in the force of it even though our understanding of it is quite different to that of the world.

Not only at Christmas or Easter or any other special day, but throughout the year we focus on our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. We should be studying about Him, praying to Him, talking about Him, and seeking to advance His cause. We must not get carried away from truth, in worldliness, nor in misguided piety as some do pointing to Romans 9:3. Here they either pretend to love lost souls more than any human possibly could or else they live in anguish because they cannot love others to the degree they think is mentioned here. That verse states, “For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh.” This verse needs to be looked over realistically in context of what Paul had experienced and was actually saying.

I have known tremendously great, dedicated people of God, but I have never known one who was willing to go to hell himself for others. If so, would that not mean that others were loved more than the Christ of one’s salvation? Such simply is not possible. But is this not what Paul was saying, or did he actually say something else?

Young’s Literal Translation of the scriptures translates this verse, “For I was wishing, I myself, to be anathema from Christ for my brethren, my kindred, according to the flesh.” Notice “was.” The apostle here refers to his past. Surely, this is what Paul meant: while a practicing Pharisee, he was zealous in persecuting Christians, and wanted nothing to do with Christ. He wanted to please his kindred according to the flesh.

The following verses in Romans Nine explain that there is a difference between the fleshly Israel (whom he sought to please earlier) and the true seed of promise. In context, this verse makes better sense than painting a pious picture that no human could fulfill, and one that would be wrong if it were possible.

So, what shall we say then? Share the gospel! Help others as much as possible, but love God more. Remember the first and greatest commandment. Also remember the witness of Solomon in Ecclesiastes 12:13, “Let us hear the conclusion of the matter. Fear God and keep His commandments for this is the whole duty of man.” It is Jesus first, not humanity first!

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think a lot of believers have been discouraged because they thought they should love their fellow man enough to give up their hope in Christ, but could not do that? What do you think to be the ultimate expression of love for God presently? Is this what the first great commandment teaches? How did Solomon put it in Ecc. 12:13?

FITLY FRAMED: A PRODUCT OF TOOLING

"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." Ephesians 2:21-22.

"Fitly framed" is an interesting description of carpentry, both in English, and in the ancient Greek language from which it comes. In Greek, it is expressed as one composite word, "*sunarmologeo*." According to lexicons of that language, the term means to literally lay or join parts together. But the idea is to lay such joints together in exactness to create useful construction.

In carpentry, joints in materials must be fitted closely to be useful. While framing may allow for minor cracks, finished carpentry must be more closely tooled and exact. Neither the framing or finishing carpenter may use materials in the rough or uncut as they are sold in retail lumber stores. But each piece must be cut to proper length, and correct angle, and perhaps sanding and gluing for a proper fit; hence, "fitly framed." Every joint then, in a well-built building, is a product of tooling. Much can be discerned from this terminology, as the Holy Spirit so moved the apostle Paul to use these words to describe the church of the Living God.

In other figures of speech, the process of church growth is fashioned in farming. The ministers of the Word sow the seed of the Word, others may water that seed, but it is always God who gives the increase. It is God who adds to His church. It may also be inferred that God does not add any junk or useless parts to His church, and every addition is not in the natural or raw state but will be fitly framed (disciplined by the Word) to make a useful joint.

Unlike inanimate materials of wood or stone that feel no pain in chipping, sawing, or sanding, the members of Christ's body will discern, though not always in pain, the sizing into the holy body. Through the tooling of the Word, members so joined realize their deadness to the world, and their new life in the body. It is a fitting of joy that never brings regret, but the enhancement of hope.

But every positive has a negative. Houses can be built on the sand, bricks may be laid without mortar, and sticks fashioned together without fasteners. In each case, or a combination, these failures are predictable. Men fall into futile activity when they run ahead of God, seeking to build their way instead of His way. Truly, except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build. A strong, scriptural church is not an overnight phenomenon, but the patient careful teaching, tooling, and exercise of the Word over time. Such blessings belong to those who love the Word and wait on the Lord, as it is stated so picturesquely in Isa. 40:31, *"But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."* God's people should pray for grace to be still, and to keep on keeping on through the tooling process!

FOR THOUGHT: What do you think will happen to a church that makes membership to be no more than simple membership in a civic club?

Would you buy a house whose bricks were merely stacked without mortar? Why?

If spiritual things are spiritually understood, how may unspiritual people be an asset to a church? Explain what you mean.

FLOURISHING CHURCHES IN VARIED CULTURES

“And he said unto them, ‘Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.’” Mark 16:15.

The church of our Lord began with 100 percent Jewish members. It quickly spread to multi-nations around the Middle East, then to Africa, Europe, and Asia. It has thrived under varied governmental systems, races, and cultures. Through Bible missionary efforts, the spread continues, and will do so until the end of the age.

Sometimes it is hard for people in one nation or culture to appreciate how the church can thrive in another, but by the design and grace of God it does. A case in point is Australia. Some think of it as America 50 years ago, but they are wrong. The largely Anglo, English speaking population is noticeably different, partly because it is a people steeped in socialism. Let me illustrate with a couple of points.

On a trip there, the pilot of our aircraft announced an unscheduled stop in Fiji. He stated that the aircraft had to take on enough fuel to land in Australia, and to make it back to Fiji since fuel was not available in Australia. Curious as to why, I was told the petrol workers were on strike because they were not being furnished underwear in their compensation. Incredible! But it was true.

In the suburbs of Sydney, there were large housing areas of what appeared to be three-bedroom, two bath homes. But a point of curiosity was the little house in every backyard. Those were outdoor toilets. The housing developments were government controlled, and though some of the areas were well over ten years old, they still did not have a sewer system, and were forbidden to install a septic system on parcels of land under five acres. So, they all used outhouses, patiently waiting for the government to do something for them.

It all seemed so strange! Could a scriptural church rise up and operate with people of this mindset? Indeed, it could and did. It continues to do so in many cities of that nation.

The core doctrines of the Faith once delivered to the saints are not bound by time, culture, governments, or by nationality. They are the expression of the Creator, Redeemer God of heaven and earth. It is His expressed will that all men should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. I Timothy 2:4.

So, whether a people find themselves in a democracy, republic, communist state, monarchy, oligarchy, socialistic, or fascist state, the gospel is still the power of God to them by which they may be saved, and the doctrines of the Bible are still available to them through the administration of the Holy Spirit, by which they may experience the blessings of being a part of the local, New Testament church. I thank God for His churches in America, and I pray for their existence the world over!

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think Americans may have their democracy and Christianity mixed up by how they feel about the church thriving under different systems? Why?

In your church, do you believe the majority should rule, or that the Bible should rule? Why?

Do you think you could properly serve God in a country of some other governmental form?

Why? Why not?

FOCUS ON THE TRUE TREASURE OF LIFE

It has been said of life that it is not the destination that counts so much as the journey! Well, that statement requires considerable explanation before it is acceptable. Both the journey and the destination are vitally important. No one makes them well without commitment and dedication to God, and to His Holy Word. Indeed, true treasure is not in a bag or bank as most men count treasure. A proper journey with the proper destination in mind accumulates the true treasures in the course of life. They are not metal or stone of earth's substance, but riches laid up in heaven for eternal enjoyment.

The correct journey of life is one of continuous additions of virtues. Some of these are gained by pursuit, and others are outright gifts. Think about it.

As one reaches the age of accountability, the goodness of God convicts of sin, righteousness, and judgment to come. When one repents and receives Jesus as personal Savior, the new birth occurs immediately, and it is wholly by grace through faith, and not of self, but it is the gift of God. Eph. 2:8-10 states it plainly, *"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast."*

Predicated on that, one has the blessed opportunity to exercise free moral agency in spiritual things; to grow in the grace of God; submitting to baptism, fellowshiping in a New Testament Church, cultivating routines of bible study, prayer, witnessing, etc.

High on the list of encouragement to all God's children is growth in knowledge. It must be pursued. Moreover, as Solomon put it, in the acquisition of knowledge one should, with all his getting, get understanding. These virtues build, one upon another, and will not be obtained if not actively sought. However, the Bible does not admonish anyone to work to acquire wisdom. This virtue is another great gift from God. James 1:5 puts it this way in his epistle, *"If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not . . ."* Wisdom is the ability to expertly handle knowledge. Do you have it? Do you want it? Ask God! He alone is the giver of wisdom. Those who possess this priceless virtue are the true winners in life. Their focus is on the true treasure!

FOR THOUGHT: How do you evaluate the journey of life with the destination, and vice-versa? What did Solomon advise one to get in addition to knowledge? Everybody admires a wise man, yet so few seem to have that requisite. Why is that?

FOOL ME ONCE, FOOL ME TWICE, AND FOOL ME ONCE AGAIN!

The first half of the 19th century is dubbed as the second great awakening in America. In the 1840s the Millerite movement arose, so called after a prominent leader, William Miller. He had it figured out that Jesus would return on October 22, 1844. No small crowd of folks divested themselves of worldly goods and waited with great expectation. Of course, it did not happen. The event became known as the Great Disappointment. But, not to give up, the date was supposedly found with error and a new date set. That did not happen either. Did the followers dissipate? Some did, but enough stayed the error to evolve into the Seventh Day Adventist Denomination.

A few decades ago, a small sect of folks believed a leader that set the date for Christ's return to earth. This was here in western Arkansas. They, too, divested themselves of material things. Many of them sat on a housetop with great expectations of seeing the monumental event. They, too, suffered a great disappointment due to ignorance of the Word of God. The charade of religious charlatans goes on. Dates are set, discolored moons due to atmospheric conditions are observed, etc. So, fool me once, and fool me twice, and fool me once again! Those who seek to know and to serve God would do well to hear the warnings of Jesus as He spoke them. One powerful one is recorded in Luke 21:8, "*And he said, Take heed that ye be not deceived: for many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and the time draweth near: go ye not therefore after them.*"

What is sorely needed is for God's people to immerse themselves in the pages of Holy Writ, to be personally informed, and thereby have the ability to share knowledge of spiritual things. Ironically, church houses are often filled with folks who have really good intentions of doing just that. But one philosopher once noted that good intentions are like good eggs, if they are not hatched in a timely manner, they will soon rot.

So, what are you waiting for? What is your purpose for taking up space on the planet? Some followers of Jesus wanted to wait until their father died and was buried, but Jesus said, "*Let the dead bury their dead. Follow me!*" Let everyone forget about the noble dreams of tomorrow. God gives us all today! Yesterday is gone forever, and tomorrow does not exist. What you have is today. You may have been fooled once, or twice. Must you be fooled again?

FOR THOUGHT: Name some catastrophe of recent years that has come upon groups of folks by their ignorance of God's Word.

Why do you think people are so vulnerable in religion when they appear to be so brilliant in secular subjects?

Do you think repeated failure to trust Christ and His Word opens people up to believe falsehood?

FREEDOM AND RIGHTEOUSNESS REQUIRE VIGILANCE

As the United States of America wades deep into its third century of being a free and independent nation, it does so without the mainstream of its citizenry possessing the values and resolve that initiated it and supported it through tough, sad, hard, and happy times. That loss is fundamental, so fundamental that the nation as it was framed may not endure much longer. What happened? Think with me!

Solomon wrote: *“Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise: Which having no guide, overseer, or ruler, provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest. How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? When wilt thou arise out of thy sleep? Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep: So shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth, and thy want as an armed man.”* Proverbs 6:6-11.

The greatest gift a nation could hope to possess in war with another would be to find them all asleep on the day of battle. Vigilance has its virtue and sleep its calamity! In spiritual warfare, the forces of evil have succeeded in rocking this nation to sleep on toxic materialism. When a majority of the population finds it more palatable to abandon its talent, mental acumen, self-determination, and personal freedom in favor of whoever will put the biggest check in the mailbox, the devil himself has no trouble garnering the necessary votes to rule, even when it is known, but not fully comprehended, that his rule will be their enslavement. Such induced lethargy and sleep provided from the labor of others wins in the battle of preferences in an unprincipled people.

This weekend, much celebration will mark yet another year in the founding of the United States of America. What a Godsend it has been to His people who for centuries yearned to be free to worship Him according to the dictates of their conscience and understanding of Holy Writ! However, judicial actions of the past half century afford much to lament in witnessing its decline. The shining global example of freedom and blessedness of this nation is a story of bloodshed, principle, dedication, and hard work. Let all who love this country stand fast in these things and be a part of its grand story. Let us all give ear to the words of the wise man who so eloquently penned, “Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people.” Proverbs 14:34.

FOR THOUGHT: Do you recall calamitous events of American history due to leadership of the nation being asleep? What about the Oklahoma City bombing in 1996? What about Pearl Harbor in 1941? What about the World Trade Center in New York? How vigilant should a nation be? Why do you think this way?

FREEDOM TO BE UNEQUAL

(Friend and brother in the ministry, Jim Harris of Florida, is credited with this idea. He may or may not approve of the contents.)

“Art thou called being a servant? Care not for it: but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather. For he that is called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord's freeman: likewise also he that is called, being free, is Christ's servant.” I Corinthians 7:21-22.

The founding documents of the United States of America would have us believe all men are created equal. I wonder where they got that idea? Rather than take issue with equality in creation, let the reader consider that the very moment one comes into this world he/she is both equal and unequal. One's parental status, environment, socioeconomic level, and I.Q. does not provide for equality but for inequality.

Though flawed as all governmental systems of men are, that inequality has, with the help of God, produced the greatest nation on earth. Capitalism's principles are based on the Judeo-Christian ethic of theology, morals, and individual initiatives.

Now, there are those who wish to enrich themselves by pandering to those who will not work, will not pursue an education, but will demand, in violent destructiveness, that those who do have initiative, and who do work, should support them. Government folks in high places push this agenda for their own obvious purpose of staying in power through “votes by pandering,” and seem determined to deprive the nation of capitalistic enterprise. Do they believe the government printing presses can keep the economy afloat forever?

As an aside, many years ago, this writer was placed on a legislative ad hoc committee to draft childcare legislation. In some of the discussions with more liberal committee members over the issue of assurance of preventing failure, it was my premise, then as now, if there is no freedom to fail, there is no freedom. If there is no freedom for all, then there is no freedom at all.

Obviously, it was the Creator's holy will that men have free moral agency; the freedom to win, the freedom to lose, the freedom to live, the freedom to die. Men who reject God and pursue the premise of evolution are determined to change that, but it is a determination destined to fail. Still, there is a sense in which all men are equal; all are sinners, and all are condemned by virtue of sin. The good news is that God provides for all men the freedom to partake of His marvelous grace, and thereby escape the destiny of sin while gaining the wealth and joys of heaven. But that freedom exercised makes men unequal. Let there be rejoicing in heaven and earth that the altogether lovely Lord Jesus, the Creator, the Christ by His own blood purchased for all who love Him, the freedom to be unequal.

FOR THOUGHT: Do you believe all people are created equal in every respect? What about those who cannot provide for themselves?

Do you think all people in heaven will be equal? If so, how do you explain the Judgment Seat of Christ for His people and the difference it will make?

May the equality of men, beyond equal opportunity to excel, ever be anything more than a Satanic lie which has fostered communism, socialism, etc.?

GIVE ME CHILDREN, OR ELSE I DIE!

“And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die.” Genesis 30:1.

Many years ago, my good friend and mentor, Dr. R. T. Perritt, wrote a book entitled, **KINDLING FIRES FOR CHURCH GROWTH**. As the title would suggest, the chapters of the book were devoted to encouragement to the Lord's people to seek growth, both spiritually and numerically, in the churches, but to do it God's way!

The text verse above, reveals an extremely deep desire to fulfill one's purpose in life. For Rachel, the wife of Jacob's choice, it was to bear children. As that scenario may be extrapolated into the present, spiritual realm, it is realized that the churches of the Lord have purpose to fulfill. They realize that unless they are given spiritual children to carry on the great work of Christ's commission to them, they will soon become extinct. Subsequently, the cry of Rachel, "...else I die." will become a reality for the churches.

The anguish of Rachel was heightened by others in the extended family bearing children. In the same manner, churches that are not growing spiritually and numerically see yet others who may not be of the "faith once delivered to the saints" growing numerically can be tempted to reach beyond biblical boundaries to incorporate unqualified members into their fold. That may produce a temporary, false sense of well-being, but growth in the Lord's churches, not accomplished His way, fails to help, and can actually hasten the spiritual death of that body.

Accordingly, as the cry of Rachel was to her husband, so let the cry of God's people be unto Him Who is able to give the proper increase. Let us be done with seeking to do the work that only God can do and increase our efforts in the work He gave us to do! Let us pray earnestly, witness genuinely, live honestly, and enthusiastically according to the hope that lies in our heart. Truly, we can plant the seed. We can water that which is planted, but it is God Who gives the increase. Thus, to the Lord of harvest let us cry, "Give us children, or else we die." This is the increase that will last. It is the increase that will weather the drought, flood, heat, cold, and the fiery darts of the devil that will carefully, cunningly, and inevitably seek to be a dividing snare to every church of the Living God. Then let it be underscored that the unadulterated Word of God should reign supreme in thought and practice, and that prayers should be intensified for the personal, and corporate fulfillment of our purpose of taking up space on the planet.

FOR THOUGHT: To what degree of human motivation should a pastor, evangelist, or church body undertake to swell the church rolls.

Do you believe all lasting increase must be added by the Lord, and it is dangerous to try to fulfill his work of the process?

What does planting and watering in church growth mean?

Do you think modern believers would do well to cry to the Lord using Rachel's plea?

GOD AND MONEY

The great triad of powers bearing heavy influence on men in the world (cosmos) of sin and death are government, finance, and religion, not necessarily in that order. Government is the expression of authority. It ranges from individual self-discipline, and the home to various levels, local to national. Financial power is embodied in the system of money, and that being heavily regulated and guarded as a means of value and exchange of time, goods, and services.

Religion, or spiritual power directly appeals to the spirit nature of mankind and goes to the very core of conviction and motivation of actions and status.

The Bible speaks plainly and forcefully about these forces and how they should regulate behavior. Quite naturally, Biblical instructions differ, often widely, from the common understanding and practice of men who are held in the grips of sin. Think with me for a moment about God and money.

From the earliest of times, men understood that material substance should be used in the expressions of government and religion. Four hundred years prior to Old Testament Law, Abraham paid tithes of material gain to the mysterious priest of God, Melchizedek. Gen.14:20. Later, the practice of tithing was incorporated into the Law God gave to Israel on Mt. Sinai. It involved the medium of money, but also included all other gains, such as crops, herd increase, even the firstborn child.

With the fulfillment of the Law by Jesus, and the institution of grace expressed by the faith once delivered to the saints, tithing as a principle of honoring God for all His blessings did not cease. As a matter of fact, it is specifically taught in the New Testament. Hebrews 7:8.

Still, the idea is not to be considered as a "have to" practice as it was under the Law, but a cheerful opportunity to lay up treasure in heaven. The Lord truly loves a cheerful giver. 2 Cor. 9:7.

Meanwhile, He taught us to use money as an instrument to make friends and influence others that they might be won to the Lord Jesus Christ. Luke 16:9. This involves alms giving and being a general blessing to others along the path of life.

God is not opposed to money, but He knows that under the present system, one cannot primarily serve God and money. But He leads men to trust Him, provides their daily bread, and the sense of great joy in using the money of His blessings to be a blessing both to God's work, and to the good of their fellow men; a big bonus in the plethora of blessings from the Father of Light. James 1:17.

FOR THOUGHT: What three great powers given to men heavily influence the course of history?

Do you believe the Bible actually teaches tithing in the New Testament era? What scripture would you use to support that teaching?

Do you believe a Christian may serve both God and mammon? Why? Why not?

GOD CHANGES MAN'S "FIXED" THEOLOGY

"And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat. But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean. And the voice spake unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common. This was done thrice: and the vessel was received up again into heaven." Acts 10:13-16.

Missouri is called the "Show Me" state. That motto has been used in a wide variety of ways, including those of theology. Consider that the First Missionary Baptist Church of Jerusalem enjoyed a tremendous influx of members on Pentecost, all of whom were Jewish. Their theological concept of the New Testament Church was like that of the Mosaic Law, for Jewish membership only. If the terms of the Great Commission, Matthew 28:18-20, were to be carried out, God would have to use some means to open their eyes. This is where Peter and Cornelius came into play. Cornelius was a gentile soldier, but one who prayed to God, did alms, and sought to do the will of God as he understood it, being a non-covenant believer. Since God's plan of spiritual salvation is universal, simple, and set forth in the simplistic terms of Romans 10:13, there is no credible avenue of thought that would consider Cornelius a spiritually lost person. But the church needed to open its mind and doors to the terms of the Great Commission, and Cornelius needed the blessing of New Covenant relationship with God.

As a result, God worked on Peter in the vision of unclean animals; the command to kill and eat, and the forthright rebuttal to Peter's objection. All of this was in preparation for a historic meeting with the first Gentile to be admitted to scriptural baptism and church membership. It was then that the apostle grasped what was happening at the home of Cornelius, but his Jewish brethren who were with him did not understand it. Thus, God allowed Cornelius to display before baptism the presence of the Holy Spirit that rested upon the church. The import was to eliminate any objection the Jewish brethren would have to admitting Cornelius to scriptural baptism, and subsequent church membership. It was a sure enough Missouri type "show me" demonstration that neither the Jewish brethren present nor those to whom a later report was given could deny. It opened their eyes to the meaning of Holy Writ.

Nothing in the Bible is new, but often what is there is new to disciples on various levels of learning. Sometimes seeing (understanding) what was there all the time, but in personal unawareness of it, brings great rejoicing in the Word, and a personal revival. In such a case, one might say that God used an old-fashioned Missouri "show me," and corrected a lot of men's theology, not individual whim, or new revelation; it was there in the Word all the time!

FOR THOUGHT: Have you made recent discoveries in the Bible? How have they changed your thinking? After reading again the story of Cornelius in Acts 10, what are your thoughts about this incident. How do you rationalize the Holy Spirit being manifest in Cornelius before baptism because it was a break in the biblical pattern.

GOD'S WILL: DEVOTION OR DIVERSION?

It was an ordinary day in the land of Moab some 3500 years ago; ordinary that is until messengers of the king knocked on the door of a known prophet of God whose name was Balaam. Similar to modern day ministers, the prophet may have been mildly depressed because he deemed his life to be slipping away in a time of uneventfulness. Perhaps he longed to have the attention of those most prominent in his society, and the popularity, prestige, and greater income that would go with that. Then it happened! He could hardly believe his good fortune. The king recognized his status as a prophet and desired his service. Also, there was a bag of gold in the offering for his hire. Surely, God would be most pleased with this. Perhaps He had even arranged it all. Such was not the case however, and rather than resign himself to the sweet will of God, he badgered, pressed, and besought God for some way to take advantage of the offer. The story is well known. It did not turn out as the prophet had dreamed, but God chose to use it all as teaching lessons for future generations.

In Num. 22-24, God allowed a common donkey to speak sense and wisdom to the prophet, as well as save his life, but that did not deter him. Then, God forbade the prophet to speak anything, but what God put in his mouth. That was a repeated blessing on the covenant people of God, whom the king wanted cursed.

Since Balaam could not curse the Hebrews, he turned to political compromise and gave counsel that caused Israel to sin against the Lord. And how did it end?

The prestige and popularity was meaningless and the gold soon was gone. Balaam was slain a short time later by the Hebrews in a battle against enemy forces with which he aligned himself. Num. 31. But the prophet does get worldly immortality which most would not want. He is mentioned in the Bible some 59 times including the epistles of Peter and Jude as well as Revelation. All are warnings of a way of life to shun.

Modern disciples should consider well the life, deeds, and end of this prophet who wanted to be God's man, but loved the world and things of it. Often it appears that the norm in modern discipleship is for church members to avoid study, meditation, and love of the Word, but practice a form of ritualistic, powerless religion. The end of that lifestyle is one of shame, and it is not new. It is spiritual nonsense, and has a predictable end based on precedents recorded in Holy Writ.

FOR THOUGHT: How important is it to you that church activities be soundly supported by the Bible?

Do you think many modern disciples would abandon discipleship if offered large sums of money, power or prestige to take another direction in life?

Could it be that many disciples fall to perceived pleasant temptations because they have failed to become well-grounded as a Christian? Explain your thoughts.

GOTTA HAVE IT TO HELP OTHERS

Mastery is required in most all important endeavors of production and service. Those who aspire to help others in health services, education, or in the production of marketable products must achieve high levels of understanding and skill to be successful. That is as it should be, but dare we think of Christianity in the same standards? Think with me a minute.

Jesus emphasized that His people were not to emulate the authority structures of the world, but to achieve greatness in humble service. Matt. 20:27. Accordingly, most folks are not prone to consider Christianity as a lifestyle of varying levels of skills, but the Word underscores that it is. Even the parable of the sower noted the fruit bearing as thirty, sixty, and one hundredfold. Matt. 13. Moreover, in the parable of the talents, some produced more than others, but each producer was commended. Matt. 25. The common factor in these two great parables of Christian service emphasize the value of preparation and skills. The foundation of initial repentance and faith must be accompanied by the mastery of salvation's purpose. Too many fail in matters of faith when they should be enjoying a high degree of success. Jesus revealed to the apostle Peter his essential need which was lacking at the time. Note Luke 22:32, *"But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren."* Certainly, Jesus was not referring here to the new birth of the spirit. It is clear that the apostles were saved men who were baptized by John the Baptist, but Jesus meant something quite specific by using the term "converted."

A quick referral to language lexicons reveals the term "converted" means "to turn around, to turn one's back to another person or thing, to turn one's self from one's course of conduct to another." The term is used in these contexts several times in the scriptures. It conveys the idea of growth in grace and knowledge to the point of being a workman who needs not to be ashamed or embarrassed, a high degree of understanding and skill in the discipline of the Word.

So just how may the modern Christian properly prepare himself to be helpful to others in matters of faith? Certainly not by being a pot that calls the kettle black or by offering to remove a splinter from another's eye when a post is in his own. Rather it is in the process of conversion. Saved folks certainly have their spirits sealed by the Holy Spirit unto the day of redemption, but the road to spiritual maturity is one of conversion from the ways of the world to the ways of the Lord in practical daily living. It is essential to rightfully help others.

FOR THOUGHT: The Christian life is really a work in progress, enduring for a lifetime. So, what degree of mastery do you think one must have to help others spiritually?

Do you believe that the more you learn about Bible teachings the greater your abilities will be to help others?

What does the Bible term "conversion" mean to you?

HOORAY, IT'S MOVING TIME!

As an adult, I have never enjoyed moving! The chore and emotional upheaval has been tolerated, even made the best of, but enjoyed? No! Perhaps shirkers, free-loaders, fly-by-nighters, etc. find some enjoyment in it, but even that is doubtful. Some are tickled if they are “moving on up on the eastside,” but even then, the mundane, emotional experience takes its toll. So, why would anyone say, “Hooray, it’s moving time?” Think with me a minute!

Consider that the move is one of permanency, of total and lasting benefit, of change in person as well as environment. Now that would be a different matter altogether. Moreover, such a move has been made, and continues to be made by millions.

By the grace of God, men may move out of sin and death into righteousness and life. The opportunity remains open to this very day to everyone because they are the biblical “whosoever.” I speak of spiritual salvation through which one may move from sin by trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ as personal Savior. That move is permanent! John 3:16.

As a saved person, one then has the privilege to move into covenant relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ as His disciple. This is accomplished through the obedience of baptism and fellowship in His church. Then, one day such a person will have the privilege of moving on up to glory to his eternal home. What a day that will be! The prospects of it makes one want to shout, “Hooray, it is moving time!”

This is moving out of darkness into His marvelous light! It is moving out of condemnation into the righteousness of Christ Jesus. This is moving out of spiritual ignorance into the enlightenment of spiritual knowledge and maturity. John 3:19-21. In short, it is hearing the call of the Master and positively responding to that call of salvation, service, blessings, and peace! John 11:28.

“O, soul, are you weary and troubled? No light in the darkness you see? There is light for a look at the Savior, and life more abundant and free. Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in His wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.” Say, what about you, dear reader? Is it moving time?

FOR THOUGHT: How many times have you moved your residence? Was it fun? What is the most uncomfortable thing about moving?

Does moving disturb your comfort zone? How does that translate into spiritual decisions?

Is moving less stressful if someone else does all the work for us? How does that idea help our spiritual decisions?

HOW ARE YOU RUNNING?

A popular topic of news and conversation these days has to do with running. From local 10K runs to regional and national marathons, the young, the healthy, and the athletically inclined fill events with gusto and expectations; some to win, some to improve on their own time, yet others to simply finish the course. It is interesting to note that the Bible has much to say about running as well. However, the topic in biblical context is not a physical race, but a spiritual one. Think with me!

The church at Corinth was told, *“Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run that ye may obtain.”* 1 Cor. 9:24. Proper interpretation here demands strict adherence to context. It is the aggregate of the church under consideration. There exists under the umbrella of “Christianity” a large number of churches with vastly diverse beliefs and purposes. They, with many numbered among the true churches, are all considered runners. But it is the disciplined disciples adhering to the faith once delivered to the saints that will receive the commendation of the Master and its attendant prize.

Attention is now turned to Hebrews 12:1, which alludes to the great crowd of witnesses in Chapter Eleven. In view of those heroes of faith, the admonition is, *“. . . Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. . . ”*

A race, by its very nature is a competitive event, testing durability. Is not a physical foot race challenging and difficult? Then how much more the spiritual race. Yet, some seem so willing to drop out at the slightest bump in the road. Winning disciples of the Lord are enveloped in practical running, fully realizing the race is not in the future, but it is currently on! How are you running?

FOR THOUGHT: A race is not only competitive; it requires certain requisites of participants. What do you think are the requirements of runners in the Christian race? List some of the common “weights” the Christian must lay aside to be successful runners.

HOW DO I WORSHIP WITH MY MONEY

“And here men that die receive tithes; but there he receiveth them, of whom it is witnessed that he liveth.” Hebrews 7:8.

What responsibility does a Christian have in the use of his money? This is an oft asked question, especially in lessons and discussions of stewardship. It is asked because there are tangential extremes that invariably get thrown into the verbal mix.

In Old Testament times, God demanded a tenth of one's increase, even the first fruits of man, beast, the fields, orchards, and vineyards. Wealth or lack thereof was not taken into consideration, except in the offerings in which the poor could offer birds instead of beasts. Under the New Testament era of grace, God's people have not received less, but more responsibility, all within the realm of spiritual maturity rather than demand.

But modern times have produced their own extremities. On one hand, some would have us to always study to boycott companies that sell what we need when those companies use their profits wrongly. I do not accept that responsibility unless the evil is blatant. I cannot be responsible for what others do with their money. I have enough trouble governing my own decisions.

On the other hand, one should be aware of his responsibility to use money wisely. It is hard to claim that there is no money for God's work when one is spending God's money (Yes, your money is God's money that you would not have unless He blessed you with the health and ability to earn it.) for alcohol, tobacco, gambling, and other vices that are a blight on society. Moreover, what does the widow who gave her last two mites to the work of God say to us? Anything???

Furthermore, it is not the church super-structural programs, but the local, New Testament churches that should be the object of concern in wise stewardship. After all it is not the tele-evangelist, the cooperative programs, or self-styled religious programs that visit you in the hospital, conduct funerals, deliver God's messages in sermon, song, Bible study, and in property maintenance commensurate to worship services. It is the local church which provides these ministries. It is worthy of the support of all its members. Maintaining it is giving to God and accepted as such. Personally, I am careful how I spend my money, and more careful how and where I give it. Every action undertaken by a church that requires money should be done at the authorization of the church and shared as equally as possible by all the membership. It is not a good thing for church members to fill the coffers of their church with no plan for the use of the money beyond the basic, weekly budget of the church. Doing so has tempted and led many into extra-scriptural social programs that detract from its God-given mission in the long run. But giving to the need and mission of the church when done cheerfully, from the heart, is acceptable to God.

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think there is a difference in attitudes among many Christians today about giving? For instance, the Pharisees dropping bags of gold into the coffers of the Temple may have been simply fulfilling obligation, but the widow casting in her last two mites must surely have done so from her heart. How will that play out in judgment?

Some tithe, but never do anything more, feeling it should now be the obligation of the church. How do you feel about that?

HOW DOES A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH ORIGINATE?

Church and state is an entirely different thing to religion and state. However, the unscriptural doctrine of universal, invisible church has been in place in the religious world for so long (since the Protestant Reformation) that most people in Protestant churches and those in government do not know the difference. Additionally, terrible things happen when the government shows favoritism to a literal, visible church or denomination of churches. Furthermore, tax favoritism toward churches has motivated less than honorable men to use such laws to create organizations for fiduciary benefits to themselves. They will tell those under the blinders of their charade to send their money to God, and, oh, yes, here is his address. With increasing, tax-free funds they build their little empires of multiple mansions, yachts, and airplanes. The increased number and variety of such religious organizations succeed in further blurring the perceptible lines between church and religion. So, one may ask if there really is an important difference, and if so, just how does a New Testament church originate?

Here is how. Having the prerequisites of personal salvation and John's baptism, men and women may covenant together to carry out the terms of the Great Commission. Matthew 28:18-20. Ideally, under the express will of an established New Testament church that is able to oversee, comfort, and encourage the new congregation. This is succession. It is the New Testament pattern. It is the only pattern acceptable to New Testament churches in their missionary efforts. Some in the theological world may "guffaw" at the idea of church succession, but that is their problem. Jesus promised it, historians confirm it, and the meaning of the Word of God is found faulty and meaningless if it is not so. So soon will the bride of Christ, His church, which has sailed through bloody seas, without mercy from the emissaries of Satan, be welcomed, and rewarded by its soon coming king.

Of course, there are those who would be quick to levy the charge of "legalism" to such rigid thinking, but it is not. It is understanding the New Testament pattern while also understanding that Jesus did not give anyone the authority to, or pronounce any blessings on those who would, change the Word of God to fit their own human thinking, or to placate a sinful world.

On a personal level, let it be known that it is a terrible thing for an eternity-bound image of Almighty God to trust his eternal state to the thinking of others, fully as much a sinner as he, instead of the pure light of the Word. If I were a blind man, I would not want to trust the safety of my travel, or the arrival to my proper destination, to another blind man.

FOR THOUGHT: Under the laws of the nation, anyone may start a religious organization and be granted tax-free status, but does that make it a New Testament church? Why? Why not? List at least two requirements of individuals who may wish to form a New Testament church.

HOW MUCH LIKE JESUS SHOULD A MODERN CHRISTIAN BECOME?

It is interesting to note that in modern Israel only about 10% are of the orthodox Jewish persuasion. Most claim no religion at all, and many are outright atheists. This may be shocking to some, but it is true. Comparing the stats to Christianity in America, of all “Christian” denominations combined, less than 15% are practicing Christians enough to be found in church on Sunday morning. Far less than that would make up conservative, serious Bible believing Christians. So, in a land and in a time when the Christian vogue appears to be to “see how far away from Bible teaching may one get, and still be thought of as a Christian,” just how much like Jesus should one become, and could that happen without being labeled as radical? Think about it!

Once a preacher preached fervently that all men are sinners. He was labeled as a misanthrope. Then he preached on salvation by grace through faith plus nothing. He was labeled as a heretic of easy religion. He preached on the importance and blessing of deep-water baptism. He was labeled as a legalistic Campbellite. So, he preached on the absolute necessity of the virgin birth of Christ. He was labeled as a Catholic. Next, he preached on eternal security of the believer. He was labeled as a Calvinistic predestinarian. Then he preached on the local church only being the highest echelon of Biblical authority among men. He was labeled as a religious bigot. Finally, he preached on joy in the Holy Spirit. He was quickly labeled as a Charismatic Pentecostal. Well, it did not end there, but thankfully neither did the readiness of that preacher to preach the Word. He understood that everybody wants to put the preacher in their particular box, and if one boldly preaches the Word, criticism will come, no matter what subject is chosen.

God’s people must stop reading into the Word their peculiar notions, and instead read out of the Word what it is saying. The plea of the scriptures is to “*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus...*” Philippians 2:5. That simply means to be motivated by the thought patterns of Christ Jesus; to reverence the Word as did Christ Jesus, and always be truthful in sharing the Word, as did Christ Jesus.

Furthermore, modern disciples are not left to deal with the Bible as an open-ended document, but to exercise the mind of Christ, which His people of covenant possess and are to teach to others. I Cor. 2:14. In doing this, His people will become of one mind in spiritual matters as they are so often admonished in the New Testament.

If this writer is simple minded or narrow minded, so be it. It just seems so very clear from Jesus’ prayer in John 17-18, that He wants His people to be unified with His mindset as revealed in the Word. That being said, it is apparent that it is far better to see how close to the scriptures one can live his life rather than how far away from the scriptures he can drift, and still be considered a Christian.

FOR THOUGHT: The world has reduced the idea of Christianity to being no more than a civic club. Do you think Jesus will approve such subverting of His church, His Word? Why? If one is as serious as he should be about his relationship with Christ, he can expect criticism. Do you think a Christian should modify his faith to avoid criticism, or double down on it as a testimony to others?

HOW TO BE CLOSE TO GOD

The question is oft asked, "How may I be close to God?" I am sure there are many answers depending upon whom is asked. So, I dare to answer that question.

First, it should be noted, the reason why God came into the world in the form of the man Jesus. Hebrews 10:5-7 states, *"Wherefore when he cometh into the world, he saith, 'Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not, but a body hast thou prepared me: In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin thou has had no pleasure. Then said I, Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me,) to do they will, O God.'"*

"To do the will of God!" Now that we have the reason, we must know where He is, and make the necessary move to be where He is. James 4:8 emphasizes this point, *"Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners, and purify your hearts, ye double minded."*

Where was God in the Old Testament times? He dwelt in the Holy of Holies of the tabernacle. So, what was in that place that He should dwell there? Simply put, it was the Ark of the Covenant. What covenant? The covenant of His Word with His people Israel, involving the terms of His relationship with them.

Well, just what was in the Ark of the Covenant that He so respected and dwelt there? The answer is in Hebrews 9:4. It was the golden pot of manna, Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of covenant written in stone. These three items in the Ark of the Covenant are representative of (1) the provisions of God, (2) the authority of God, and (3) the Word of God. In these God is pleased to dwell always.

So where is He in New Testament times? He dwells in (1) the fleshed-out image of His invisible being, Jesus, the only begotten Son of God. Hebrews 1:1-3; (2) He dwells in His church, the pillar and ground of the truth, and the body of which He is the Head; Acts 1:1, Timothy 3:15; (3) He dwells in the heart of penitent people who learn His Word and who follow it. Hebrew 13:5.

So, what is seen in both Old and New Testaments but the provisions of God, the authority of God, and the Word of God. Where those things are, and are respected, one will find, and be close to God. The more one turns attention to these things, and disciplines himself to live in them, the more he will realize the presence of God and the marvel of His righteous work among men. There is no place so good, and with benefits here and hereafter than being close to God; and He made a way for every one of us to be there.

FOR THOUGHT: How does the command in James 4:8 and lesson of the provisions of the Ark of the Covenant connect?

If God is pleased to dwell where his provisions, authority, and word are, do you think it possible to be close to God outside of that dwelling? Why?

How do you see modern churches paying attention to these three things?

HOW TO HAVE A BLESSED LIFE

In these last days of the age, lives often display a considerable amount of oxymoronic confusion. That is, what we say and what we do are often contradictory. For instance, everybody wants to go to heaven, but few want to go to worship services. Everybody wants to be rich, but few want to work. Everybody wants to have friends, but few are willing to initiate friendliness. The list could go on. This underscores the point of this article. Everybody wants to be blessed, but few will initiate steps of progress to have a blessed life.

So, what are those steps that should be initiated in order to have a blessed life? Perhaps it would be helpful to note what no small number of folks have pursued only to be disappointed. Some lock in on higher education. Others see a blessed life as being financially wealthy, and all other things in life are viewed as a means to that end. To others it is mastery in some art or science. Still others think a blessed life is to be found in the acquisition of power, popularity, or authority. Any one of these, or all of them together, are roads to failure in the pursuit of a blessed life. It is not that many of these things are wrong or sinful in themselves, but they must be subjugated to the will and Word of God to fulfill their purpose for existence.

Again, what are the steps to a blessed life? How is it to be identified? It seems more than logical that the Creator of all things should be consulted for a correct definition. In the introductory message contrasting Old Covenant tenants to the New Testament, Jesus was, in the great Sermon on the Mount, plainly spelling it out to His church. Then let that be heard again. In Matt. 5 He said:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

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.”

Is this different to the world? Yes, indeed, but it is undisputedly the blessed life!

FOR THOUGHT: Which of the above beatitudes have you experienced as a Christian?

Do you think a believer may have a blessed life by experiencing none of the above?

Does the reality of Christianity presented by Jesus seem widely different to what is commonly heard and/or practiced in most churches today? Explain what you mean.

I WOULD GIVE ANYTHING IF . . .

“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:” I Peter 1:18-19.

How many times has it been heard: “I would give anything if . . .?” A traveler stopped by a beautiful orchard to purchase some of its luscious fruit. He exclaimed to the orchard owner, “I would give anything if I could grow fruit like this!” “You certainly can!”, replied the orchard owner, “but it takes time and a lot of hard work. The trees have to be planted and given time to grow. They must be fertilized, watered, and pruned.” That seems to be the barrier for most wishful thinkers. A church member once told this writer, “I would give anything to know the Bible as you do!” The reply was simple. You certainly can. God is no respecter of persons. If you will read the Bible, study and pray every day, spend several years in seminary, then add to it several decades of additional study and presentations, it will happen! “No way!” said the would-be Bible expositor. On another occasion, someone said, “I would give a thousand dollars if I could play the piano like your daughter does!” The reply was quick. “Cheapskate! It cost me a lot more than a mere thousand dollars and it cost her many years of hard consistent practice.”

The world is filled with the wishful thinkers who would give anything if . . . However, that which is prized is associated with great cost. This is exactly why the prized possibility of spiritual salvation, and an eternity in heaven, comes at the greatest of all possible costs, but it is the work of the benefactor, not the beneficiary. God so loved the world that He would give anything to redeem it to Himself, and that is just what it cost Him: Himself! The very Creator God found it necessary to affix His own eternal destiny with that of mankind if there were to be any possibility of redemption. To that end He became one of us, and although He knew no sin, He became sin for us, and paid a debt He did not owe for one we could not pay. What an honor then it is to be born from above, to be a true Christian, a child of the King, a part of His bride, the pillar and ground of the truth. Would you give anything for that? Then that is just what it will cost. Give Him yourself in repentance and faith, and know that you are no longer your own, but are bought with a price, even the sacrificial blood of heaven’s dearest!

FOR THOUGHT: What value could be placed on the price God paid for man’s redemption? If redemption is not by gold, silver, or man’s wisdom, what is the price paid for your salvation? Could there be a bigger fool than one who gains the whole world, but loses his own soul? Would you really give anything, if . . .?

IDENTIFYING ANTICHRIST

“Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time.” 1 John 2:18.

Although I do not remember it, my first appearance in church was at the age of two-weeks. Reared to be in church every Sunday, often involved a considerable amount of conversation about antichrist in those days both in and out of worship services. Antichrist was always identified as one individual whose spirit dominated the government. The gas and sugar rationing stamps of early WWII was surely the mark of the beast, and if they were not, social security numbers surely were. Those reflections promote smiles, but there is also a lot of heartfelt thankfulness that my family and others in the community were concerned enough with life, and the Bible to make such conversations. Presently, it just seems appropriate to review some of the things they did not know.

Like “baptism” the term “Christ” is a Greek word transliterated into English. Also, “Messiah” is a Hebrew word transliterated into English. Both are translated as “anointed.” So, to say “anti-messiah” or “antichrist” is to say in English “anti-the-anointed.” The understanding of “anointed” is that it is the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit of God.

This runs deep into Hebrew history. The anointing of the Holy Spirit was a special empowerment bestowed upon high priests, prophets, and kings. It allowed those individuals to perform their God-given tasks correctly and appropriately. It could be bestowed, and it could be removed without reference to the new birth as exemplified by King Saul. It drove David into deep prayer that it might not happen to him. That empowerment continued in special contexts in the New Testament.

Jesus is the anointed (Christ) of God, and He is the Head of the body. His anointing was accomplished at his baptism. Moreover, as it was appropriate for the Head of the body to be anointed, so it is appropriate for the body of the Head to be anointed. The man Jesus was ceremonially anointed at His baptism, and His body on earth was anointed on the Day of Pentecost. So, please consider what all that means.

In the days of the Apostle John, there were already many antichrists. 1 John 2:18. They denied our Lord and His holy faith. Over the last two millennia, their kind has multiplied exponentially. John went on to use the term “antichrist” four more times in his epistles where it is confined in the Bible (in word, not in subject matter).

In the understanding that the head of the body (Jesus) also anointed the body of the Head (the church), an expanded viewpoint of “antichrist” is underscored. Consider that those who are opposed to the teaching of the New Testament are antichrist to the one who gave us the Word. Moreover, they are antichrist or anti-anointed in belief and action toward those who are anointed as the pillar and ground of the truth, the true New Testament church of our Lord. Here then, is the spirit of those John identified as antichrists in his day, and of those who have opposed the anointed body of the anointed Head down through the centuries. Such are truly antichrist. Their spirit will be the same spirit that ushers in the man of sin, the son of perdition, in the very last days.

FOR THOUGHT: Two entities were anointed in the New Testament: Jesus at His baptism, and His church at Pentecost. The church, His body, is under heavy mandate to follow Jesus’ teachings set forth in the New Testament. Does it make sense that to be against one is really to be against both, and such warrants the label, “antichrist?”

The spirit of antichrist is rampant these last days, but do you believe that there will come one man who will be known as Antichrist?

IN HIS STEPS

Throughout the land a cry is heard in ever increasing intensity as the pain of predominant iniquity and evil seems to grow ever stronger. It is the anguish of truth rejected, of time-honored principles spurned, and of sin reigning from cottage to palace, from homes to educational institutions, to governments. It is a cry of spiritual warfare from saints who are predestined to be overcome even as they, themselves, become overcomers from the hell-bound quagmire of Christ-rejecting societies. Think with me for a moment.

The cry is not a new thing, neither is its cause. Rather it is a repetitious story of mankind in his fallen state. Consider that as far back as King David and beyond, the cry, and its cause, claimed national attention. The Psalmist declared in 2:1-2, *"Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together against the LORD, [Jehovah/Jesus] and against his anointed, [His true church] saying, Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us."* Truth cramps the style of the wayward whose fixation on sin and self bears them swiftly through the wide gate and down the broad way.

Israel's looming destruction by the Babylonians led Jeremiah to cry out, *"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.'"* Jeremiah 6:16.

From time immemorial the best way to go with the fewest harmful obstacles is the old, proven, time-honored path. Spiritually, this is the time-honored truth of God and His Word that provide a lamp for the feet, and a light for the way. It is the good way of peace. Let me illustrate with childhood experience.

The summertime found most children barefoot, if not from necessity, at least by choice. Walking the pastures of the countryside, one might easily be injured by briars and other obstacles so environmentally common. However, the pastures where cattle grazed would always afford a well-worn, smooth path from its remote ends to the barn with its bovine provisions. Choosing that path in the pasture was a no-brainer.

The conclusion is inescapable. We are not called to be trailblazers, but to walk in the path so expertly set for us. Trailblazers fail every time. Only one was qualified to blaze the trail for the saints: Christ Jesus. Peter put it well in 2:21 of his first epistle, *"For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow in his steps."* Why don't you quit trying to blaze your own trail and walk in the peace and promise of His!

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think some people want to be trailblazers in life, rather than walk in proven, time-honored paths because they have too much sinful ego? What else?

Hiking in a forest, would you rather walk in a cleared pathway or in the briars, rocks, and other entanglements? If the former, why would the forest of religion be preferred over the Bible?

What do you think about the rage of the heathen in Psalm 2:1-2?

INSTRUCTIONS? THERE ARE INSTRUCTIONS?

"Hey, dad! I just bought this. It is all in the box. Will you put it together for me?" Well, of course, dad would be happy to do that. After all, he has a tendency to love construction and mechanics of various sorts. Whether it is a bookcase, desk, what-not, or other "do-it-yourself" item, dad is fully confident. After all, it is fairly simple, and what could go wrong? Oh, brother! How many readers have been in these shoes!

So, in full confidence, the work begins. As the project nears an end, the last few pieces just do not seem to fit. Perhaps the manufacturer forgot to drill holes in the right place. Perhaps they made a mistake in their quality control and boxed the wrong pieces. It is then that someone suggests that it might be helpful if the instructions were consulted. "Instructions? There are instructions?" Sure enough, the wrong pieces were used early on. Now, there is just one thing to do. Take it apart so it can be put together correctly. In the country that was called "licking your calf all over again!" So much for the zealous confidence!

It occurs to this writer that multitudes of people approach religion in the very same way. They are confident that God will be pleased with whatever they do, believe, and teach, because they are sincere, and humanly speaking, mean well. After all, parents did this, friends do this, "churches" and "pastors" do this, so it must be right. In every case, the wrong people are consulted and followed. The Bible term for this sort of "Christianity" is "iniquity."

What is worse, many will not find out just how great their wasted life cost them until they stand before the Judge of all men. How much better it is to consult the instructions! God did not leave mankind without instructions. It is called the Holy Bible. It does not agree with the sinful nature of unrepentant men, many churches, and many pastors, but it brings unparalleled joy and peace to the repentant who look to it as the final authority and take its instructions to heart.

Say! What kind of life are you building? Is it full speed ahead in full confidence in the flesh, in self, in some religious leader? The wisest thing you will do in life is consult God's instruction book of life in detail, and often. The life it builds for you will be right, rewarded, and accepted by the Creator/Savior/Judge! Paul told Timothy and therefore us all, *"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 Timothy 3:16-17. When the short span of life is over on earth, works are then all finished no matter how right or wrong, and there is no taking it apart to start over again. . . and . . . Eternity . . . is a very long time!

FOR THOUGHT: Why do you think people tend to ignore instructions?

Think of four reasons people give for not reading the Bible?

On a far journey, a map is most helpful. Is not the journey of life more important, and in greater need of an instructive map?

Could it be that topwater religions have lured people into thinking God is really an advanced man who will understand and ignore our failures? Is this what "A God of Love" means?

IS LIFE TOO MUCH?

"There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it." I Corinthians 10:13.

"That is just too much," said the crippled man with a pinball machine strapped to his back. His was a justified complaint, but nowadays complaints of life flood society from every corner. Increased luxuries of the 21st Century have brought more than their share of increased duties and responsibilities, without stretching the day beyond the common 24 hours. It is just too much!

Under modern pressures fully half of marriages will end in divorce. Country and Western singers belt out their moaning of "Make the World Go Away," "Take This Job and Shove It," etc. as the rat race becomes a rat trap. Where is all the goodness of the success ladder when each rung of it is hollow as soon as achieved? So, suicides increase, drug use and alcohol consumption skyrockets, and counsellors need counselling.

Sometimes, it is helpful to know that some of God's greatest people have felt such pressures and frustrations. Moses complained to God, *"Wherefore hast thou afflicted thy servant? . . . have I conceived all this people . . . I am not able to bear all this people alone, because it is too much for me"* Num. 11:11-14.

Elijah buckled under threats from Jezebel, and Jeremiah was frustrated over fruitless ministry to an impenitent people, Jer. 9:12. So, as it was with the ancients, it is with modern man. Life is declared to be just too much. But life in its proper perspective is never really too much. When life with all its responsibilities and duties are subordinated to God, and when He is the primary resource, one never has to throw up hands and declare, "It's just too much!"

Of course, there are those who would be quick to say that faith is a crutch. Well, that is O.K., too. I freely admit to needing one. I find my Lord Jesus and His blessed Word of life to be infinitely better than illicit sex, alcohol, drugs, suicide, and all the other similar vices to which men turn when under pressure, or not under pressure.

As of this date, the Bible records the trail of men for six thousand years. Every historical record of it is accurate. Every prophecy is exactly true. Having read the last chapter of the book, I know how it is all going to end. Furthermore, from the view that it presents of the end time, and the eternal status of the soul, it is inconceivable that one would willingly ignore the preparations it affords every never-dying soul. Thinking of being without Christ Jesus both here and especially in eternity is the one thing that should make every offspring of Adam say, "Now that is the thing that is just too much!"

FOR THOUGHT: Have you ever been so pressed by temptations that you thought it too much? What does the Bible mean when it says we will not be tempted more than we can bear? Does God take away temptations, or do people ignore their exit signs? Why would a believer turn to the common vices of sin when under pressure?

IS THERE REALLY A NEW TESTAMENT PRIESTHOOD?

Most everyone knows there was the Aaronic priesthood in the Old Testament. In modern times the Catholic Church and some Protestant churches host priesthoods, but the term is not so much heard in Baptist circles. Still, there definitely is priesthood in Baptist churches, but not as those appearing in the aforementioned churches. Please consider this matter with me.

The Hebrew term “priest” is “cohen,” which basically means to serve God particularly in religious affairs on behalf of oneself as well as others. Principally, priests were to study the Word of God, then teach and administer the Word of God to, or for, others in total accordance with that Word. When one thinks of Old Testament priests, the idea of animal sacrifices comes to mind. They did this, but much more. Sacrifices were to be offered at the Temple in Jerusalem, but a community of priests existed in every tribe of Israel for the purpose of standing for, and teaching to others, the Word. Old Testament priests served under a high priest, who alone could offer the “Day of Atonement” sacrifice on behalf of the nation. In an attempt to emulate that pattern, Catholic, and some Protestant priests serve under an earthly high priest in a sort of hierarchy. For Catholics it is the Pope. For Anglicans, it is the Archbishop of Canterbury. They even go so far as to absolve the guilt of sin for their parishioners.

However, as we seek the biblical pattern, we learn that the New Testament churches are indeed New Testament priests, not just the preacher or pastor, but every member. The apostle Peter puts it this way in I Peter 2:5, *“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.”* According to the New Testament, some, but not all, of those sacrifices include our bodies as living sacrifices, Romans 12:1-4, and the praise of our lips, Heb. 13:15. Certainly, it is the commission of the New Testament churches of priests to win men to Jesus, baptize them, and teach them all things Christ commanded. Matt. 28:18-20. This is a perpetual service on earth. Moreover, the New Testament priesthood serves under the one and only approved High Priest, even Jesus, as is taught in Hebrews 3:1; 4:14,15; 5:1,5,10; 6:20; 7:26; 8:1,3; 9:7,11,25; 10:21.

Every person who has repented of sins and received Christ Jesus as his personal Lord and Savior, then followed Him in deep water baptism upon the authority of one of His priestly churches, has been admitted into the New Testament priesthood. Such ones serve and are accountable to the one and only High Priest, even Jesus. A good church and a good pastor will watch out for the wellbeing of one another in the service of this priesthood, but it MUST be understood that accountability is to the High Priest, and that day of joy or sorrow will come. II Cor. 5:10. What a true joy it is to serve as a New Testament priest under the High Priest, Jesus. Every person on earth should respond positively to the longsuffering of our High Priest by seizing upon this grand opportunity.

FOR THOUGHT: If every New Testament church member is a priest of God, what are some of the sacrifices he is to be offering?

Who is the high priest of the Lord's churches?

Is the pastor of a church to be considered its priest alone? Why? Why not?

JUST A LITTLE MORE SLEEP

Sleep was created for earthly life as the means of necessary refreshment to the body. Blessed are those who are able to sleep six to eight hours each night; but cursed are those whose goal is to sleep life away during both day and night. Doubtless the sleep of a laboring man is sweet, as said by the wise man, Solomon, but those who sleep in the affairs of life can expect poverty and loss. Let's think about it!

Just what is this sleep in the affairs of life? It may be identified as one's personal comfort zone. It is the nature of the flesh to create a comfort zone, and to disdain any call to consider things that might endanger that insulation to the affairs of life. That is sleep. Through such sleep, fortunes have been lost, businesses gone bankrupt, and lives shipwrecked. The Bible underscores this important principle. Consider that it was while they slept that the Midianites were suddenly put to flight by the small band of Gideon. It was while men slept that the Medes and Persians brought an end to Babylon, the first great, world empire. It was while men slept that an enemy sowed tares among the wheat in the parables of Jesus. Moreover, it will be while men sleep that the bridegroom (Jesus) comes, and many will not be ready to meet Him.

Solomon said, *"How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? When wilt thou arise out of thy sleep?"* Prov. 6:9. He went on to say, *"Love not sleep, lest thou come to poverty; open thine eyes, and thou shalt be satisfied with bread."* 20:13. Modern times have underscored just how easy it is for individuals and churches to sleep when they should be swimming upstream in holy proclamations of salvation and the soon-coming King of Kings! One might name many reasons why this condition exists, but none of them are acceptable excuses for it.

So, what will we find in the New Testament regarding this specific subject? A quick survey shows much. Let us hear Paul as he admonished the Romans, *"And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed."* Rom. 13:11. Similarly, he taught the Thessalonians, *"Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober."* 1 Thess. 5:6. God's people are not children of the night, but the children of the day. They are to be awake, alert, watchful, and understanding of what and why things are happening. In so doing, the example of our Lord will be followed. One may be sure that "He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep." Psalm 121. Are you a "ho-hum, you're okay, I'm okay," kind of person, or are you awake, discerning the signs of the time in accordance with the Word, and listening for the shout?

FOR THOUGHT: The sleep that is condemned in the Bible is not the necessary restoration of the body, but mental and spiritual sleep to harmful principles and wickedness of the world. That being said, name a few things today to which men appear to be asleep.

What does "open thine eyes, and thou shalt be satisfied with bread" mean?

How would you define the life of a person who is wide awake? One who is asleep?

JUST SLAP THE NEXT LITTLE BOY!

It seems the more affluent society becomes, the more we become strangers to one another. Privacy is prized, right and wrong are rationalized on the basis of personality instead of principle, and selfishness among people with things ever increases. "What is wrong for everyone else may be right for me," seems to be a widespread rationalization. It is not a flattering commentary on 21st century America, but it is largely accurate.

A recent story illustrates the point. A lady enrolled her son in school following a move to a Midwestern town. She told the teacher that her son was an especially good child. However, she said in case he did misbehave, the teacher should just slap the little boy next to him and he would straighten up right away.

Truly, the annals of history abound with skewed, selfish attitudes, and the terrible end each reaped as a result. Nebuchadnezzar had to run with cattle for years to gain the right attitude. Pharaoh got to see his nation brought to ruin, and its army destroyed. Haman was privileged to be hanged on his own gallows he had prepared for the execution of others. Herod was eaten by worms. On and on the stories go, and why is it so? Why are these annals of history preserved? The answer is loud and clear, and found in I Cor. 10:11, *"Now all these things happened unto them for examples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come."* It is specifically stated in verse six of that chapter, *"Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted."*

The God Who is no respecter of persons makes it plain that responsibility for actions or lack thereof lies squarely on the individual. Selfishness, greed, envy, and every other sin will reap its just reward, and there will be no skewed rationale for blaming someone else. The straight-line approach of God's judgments will not be bent for anyone. This is underscored in the matter of a personal relationship one is to have with the only begotten Son of God. How do you fit into this line of thinking?

FOR THOUGHT: Do people still want to blame others for their own failures?

If men are not supposed to learn from others, why is the Old Testament preserved?

What is wrong with the value system of anyone who would delight in another being punished for his own mistakes?

KANGAROOS CAN'T EAT JUST ONE

While carrying out the objectives of a mission trip to Australia some years ago, a little time was taken when convenient to see some sights and get a thorough feel for the country. One brief aside found us in a drive-through zoo near the city of Sydney. One area was a walk through and featured such lovely animals as the koalas and kangaroos. The koala's diet is strictly the leaves of the Eucalyptus tree, so while admiring the little creatures, there was no feeding them.

On the other hand, kangaroos will eat quite a number of things, and tourists were allowed to feed them a small amount of approved food. Laura had a small bag of potato chips and found that they really liked them. While feeding one momma kangaroo, she exhausted the bag, but Mrs. Roo was not satisfied. So, she grabbed Laura's arm with her small paws, leaned back on her huge tail and soundly kicked her with large back feet, though not too forcefully. The fright of it all lasted only a moment, and immediately gave way to laughter, and referencing the popular pun of the day, "No one can eat just one," to which we added, "Even a kangaroo!"

Over the years, the incident evoked joy and laughter, but a great spiritual lesson, too. How good is the feeling of forgiveness, and how sweet is the Word of God. When first feeding upon it, the newborn child of God wants more, and more. The psalmist cried, "*How sweet are thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth.*" Psalm 119:103.

Paul told the Corinthians that they should, "*As newborn babes desire the sincere milk of the word.*" But it is not to stop there. The time had come when many should have been eating the meat of the Word, but being unable to do so, still needed the milk.

History records so many of the Anabaptists, called Waldenses, and others, too, who memorized, and could quote perfectly, entire books of the Bible. It was so precious to them.

Alas! Modern Christians may possess multiple copies of the entire Bible but be unfamiliar with their eternal content. It must not be forgotten that every member of the human family is racing pell-mell to meet his maker; to judgment of life based entirely upon the instructions of Holy Writ. The blessed ones are, and will be, those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. Similar to the kangaroo of so long ago, we must not be satisfied with one verse, or one chapter, or one book. We need the whole thing. So, open the book, please! Pass me the knowledge of "Thus saith the Lord!"

FOR THOUGHT: Remember as a new Christian how you wanted to know more and more about the vast pool of Bible knowledge? What happens to that desire?

When the Bible ceases to appeal to the believer, what has happened to him spiritually?

Do you see people seeking to satisfy spiritual needs with human bologna?

KEEP IT SIMPLE, SIMON

“For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” Gal. 5:14.

How many Bible instructions are there for spiritual people to absorb on Christian Maturity Road? Actually, there are sixty-six books of it that comprise the Holy Bible. If a disciple of the Lord has not spent a few hours in each of them (not that that is sufficient), he is falling woefully short of Christian responsibility. That being said, it is still awesome that God’s expectations of His people are correctly condensed to a precious, few words. Think with me about this marvelous reality!

Solomon said, *“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.”* Ecc. 12:13. Certainly, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and keeping His commandments involves much study to know and understand them. So that simple reduction is not simple, and it is not a reduction except in the number of words in the expression. Later, in the ministry of Jesus, He was asked about the greatest commandments. Jesus replied that the first is to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. He went on to say that the second was to love thy neighbor as thyself. Then, He concluded, *“On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”* Matt. 22:40. Still later, the apostle Paul told the churches of Galatia, *“For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”* Gal. 5:14.

Most certainly, there is much to learn and deeply appreciate in the sixty-six books of Holy Writ. But it is wonderfully condensed both by Old Testament and New Testament writers as well as by Jesus, Himself. Learning the Word of God is the most important thing in life for every offspring of Adam, but while one may not be well versed in Moses, Job, the prophets, or Psalms, he can be confident in the golden rule, knowing that if in his heart he truly loves God, and does in fact love his neighbor as himself, he is walking in the smiles of God. For in these things all the other commandments find fulfillment.

Let us not be guilty, then, of laying burdens on men that they may not be capable of understanding in their present status. Instead, preachers and teachers should emphasize the common, condensed principles of right to them, as they are guided along in deeper matters on Christian Maturity Road. KISS: “keep it simple, Simon!”

FOR THOUGHT: It has been said that God’s plan of salvation is so simple, that not even a fool should err regarding it. Do you think that is so?

In light of scriptures used in this article, do you think serving God should be complicated?

May something profoundly important also be profoundly simple? Explain!

KILLING MOSES —WHY?

“And it came to pass by the way in the inn, that the Lord met him, and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet, and said, ‘Surely a bloody husband art thou to me.’” Exodus 4:24-25.

Moses was a man of many brushes with death. He was launched in a baby float to escape the death order of Pharaoh. Later, he had to flee Egypt to avoid retribution for a crime he had committed against an Egyptian taskmaster. When he returned under a heavenly commission to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt, they often threatened to stone him for the troubles he had supposedly brought upon them. Finally, and due to another sin, God gently took his life out of this world on the peaks of Mt. Pisgah. But there was another time of great significance. An angel of the Lord met Moses in the way with the purpose of killing him! What? Why? What is this?

Read about it in Exodus 4:24-26. Moses had married Zipporah in the wilderness of Sinai and had neglected to perform the token of the Abrahamic covenant on his son. Now, he was in the process of becoming the leader of his people, a representative of the God of heaven and earth to Pharaoh, and that while in neglect of the basic tenets of obedience to the Lord. It appears that Zipporah was none too happy about the whole ordeal, but she accomplished it, and the Lord allowed Moses to go on with his commissioned work.

This incident constitutes a biblical “slap in the face” to so many who brush off baptism as relatively unimportant, and/or an ordinance that may be performed by anyone in any way. Let it be noted that if it is in the Word of God, it is not unimportant.

The Hebrews in their wilderness journey have been referenced as “the church in the wilderness.” That is correct. Those folks were a saved family that grew into a nation. They yielded to the Lord their firstborn by applying the blood of the paschal lamb on their doorposts. They were baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea. Indeed, as most modern Baptists would say, they were a saved, baptized, called out assembly; hence, a church, although not a New Testament church.

So, the token of the covenant, the cutting away of flesh, was most important both to them, and to the heavenly Father from Whom it originated. In like manner, the token of New Covenant relationship with God (burial of the fleshly man) is vitally important today.

To be sure, one may be spiritually saved, and never be baptized, but in baptism one is raised to walk in newness of life, i.e., New Covenant life. One may never be a member of a bona fide New Testament church without it.

Finally, the Word teaches us that there were some who rejected the counsel of God against themselves, not being baptized of Him.” Luke 7:30. Moses' mistake nearly cost him his life. Saved people who do not have scriptural baptism today forfeit the reward of New Covenant life both here, and hereafter. Let's learn from Moses!

FOR THOUGHT: How does circumcision and baptism relate to the covenants of God?
Do you think an angel would have actually killed Moses had he refused?
Do you think believers today forfeit much reward of life by not submitting to proper baptism?

LABOR AND LIGHT

It is Labor Day weekend. A foreigner might get the wrong impression from the way our phrases and titles are framed. It is not a special day to labor, but a day to rest from labor and reflect on the blessings of labor, and the God-given ability to do it. There are similarities between labor and light that come to mind. Think about it!

God's people are to labor, in fact, with much difficulty, to have, and to walk in light, letting the light of their spiritual life shine in a darkened world. But we do not have a specific day set aside to just reflect on our Christian labor. Perhaps there is a reason for that. Perhaps it is because like resting from labor on Labor Day, we tend to cease from our Christian labor every day. Presently, the hourglass of time is fast running out of sand, and it is so important that spiritual labor be renewed. And just what might that be? Simply put, it is receiving light and walking in light. After all, "There's a call comes ringing over the restless wave: send the light, send the light!" Jesus is light, and He is life. The repetitive biblical admonition to all who call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ is to walk in light. It is there that we have fellowship with Him. It is there that our life reproves the darkness of sin and rebellion toward God. Moreover, we are not left to guess how such a walk is to be accomplished. David of old said, *"Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path."* Psalm 119:105. John put it this way in I John 1:6-7: *"If we say we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin."*

To walk (manner of lifestyle lived) necessitates action. Too many church members have made a profession of faith but are doing little to nothing as a laborer to advance in the light Jesus brought to men, and in which He continues to walk. How appropriate, then, it would be to not only be thankful for the ability to labor on this holiday, but to be thankful for the opportunity to labor spiritually; to walk in the light of truth as a workman who needs not to be ashamed, but who is able to rightly divide the word of truth.

FOR THOUGHT: How does the claim of light, and the absence of labor create a lie? What does walking in the light of the Son of God have to do with forgiveness from sin? In your words, what do light and labor have to do with each other?

LANDMARKS OF BAPTIST FAITH

Baptist Churches lay claim to continued existence since the days of the apostles. They are the only community of churches with such origin. They have not been called by the same name, but were known variously as Paterines, Novations, Paulicians, Albigenses, Waldensians, Petro-Brusians, Donatists, Anabaptists, etc. These names, and others, were put upon them, usually by the population of their location throughout the centuries. However, there is a common thread running through them all by which they are identified as one and the same people. That thread is a core of common beliefs. Recognizing that fact, scholars of various Protestant faiths, including Methodists, Episcopalian, Lutheran, and Catholic, too, have verified their continued existence since the apostles, and that those churches are the only community of churches which have never symbolized with Rome.

These churches were often nomadic of necessity because of persecution from the religious life of Rome, which was most zealous to unite all religions in the empire, or else put them out of business via taxation, confiscation of property, burning of houses of worship, imprisonment, and execution of the people espousing different views and practices.

There were things about them in different countries and in different times that were uncommon, but the common thread was there exemplified in a statement of Faith dated 1120 A.D. in THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCHES OF THE VALLEYS OF PIEDMONT, written in 1654 by Samuel Moreland.

The landmarks, which have always identified the people presently known as Baptists, who are the legitimate successors of those earlier named, but all of whom were generally known as Anabaptists, are 1) The depravity of the total man, that is, all of mankind are sinners by nature and practice; 2) Spiritual salvation is effected by grace through repentance and faith in Christ plus nothing else; 3) There is eternal security of the believer in Christ, since all who believe in Jesus as personal Savior are granted everlasting life; 4) Baptism is effected by total immersion in water of a professed believer by the authority of a bona fide New Testament Church.

Of course, there are quite a number of other doctrines which make up historic and modern confessions of faith. All of them are important, but those four core doctrines are consistently identified as present and foundational among the Lord's churches wherever, and whenever, they are found. They truly are landmarks of the first church and its successors.

Solomon said it well in Proverbs 22:18, *"Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set."* Today, a shallow people are giving way to marginalization by the world's humanistic religions. Let the wisdom of Solomon be heard, for when the landmarks are gone, the ship of church is perished.

FOR THOUGHT: Look up Ephesians 3:21 and Matthew 28:20. Do these verses promise perpetuity to the Lord's church?

The existence of a chicken testifies that chickens have been on earth since Eden. Could the same principle apply to churches continuing since Christ, if they adhere to the core doctrines of the Bible? Why? Why not?

LANGUAGE MAKES THE WORLD GO AROUND

One of the most marvelous abilities of the human mind is that of communication, facilitated by language, whether written or spoken. It is nothing short of awesome!

Language comes from God, and though much evolution of it has occurred since its diversity at the Tower of Babel, it remains the single-most powerful tool of the species to advance, or to deteriorate, as the case may be.

Those wishing to make the most of their human potential should pay close attention to language. It is the lawyer's paradise; the conveyance of order; the mastery of disciplines when coupled with understanding, and the scribe's tool of recording fictional or non-fictional information.

It is fascinating that certain simple lines drawn in consistent patterns always denote certain sounds, known as phonemes. Moreover, when coupled with other specific, separate patterns, known as letters, ideas are communicated in ways commonly, recognized. But there is also language that transcends the common process. It is language expressed to the soul by the handiwork of God in nature. It is not alphabetical; it is not verbal; it is not written with pen and paper. It is the universal witness of God that Paul spoke of in Romans 10:17-18, *"So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. But I say, have they not heard? Yes verily, their sound went into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world."* "Sound" and "word" here are used symbolically to denote the communication of ideas. This is a reference to Psalm 19:1-3, *"The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard."* In short, one's reckoning with his Creator is facilitated in the species, and overwhelmingly, unmistakably, portrayed in nature itself, so that there is no excuse for failure to establish a relationship with Him.

Another case is that of one Helen Keller. Born blind and deaf, communication with her was impossible for many years. Once established, she was witnessed to about God. She said that she had known Him for a long time and trusted Him daily. Again, Paul reminded the Romans, and all of us, that the Spirit helps our infirmities when we do not know how best to pray because it makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Romans. 8:26.

But be it mundane or heavenly, there is no sweeter, important communication than the words "I love you!", which forever reverberates from the cross of Calvary where Jesus died that all of us might live.

FOR THOUGHT: In light of the above verses of scripture, do you think there will be any excuse for anyone at all for not yielding themselves to the Creator?

Have you ever felt a strong urge to cry out to God, but words failed you?

May one communicate with God without the utterance of words?

How important is daily communication with God?

LEARNING FROM UNRIGHTEOUSNESS

One might well consider the unjust, unrighteous, iniquitous folk to be a poor source from which to draw learning, but perhaps not! Think with me for a minute!

In Luke 16:1-12, the parable of the unjust steward is found. A brief review of this sometimes troubling, simple, all-too-commonplace parable will reveal much. The unjust steward took unfair advantage of his master's goods and wasted them. When it was discovered, he was given warning of his impending termination. Immediately, he acted to reduce the amount of goods in bad credit, helping his master's bottom line, but also using action to the advantage of his creditors to create a personal bond of indebtedness by which he might have a place to land when actually terminated. It was his master, whose goods he wasted, who commended the steward. He did not commend his unrighteous acts but recognized and commended his shrewdness.

It is here that Jesus makes application for His disciples then and now. It illustrated His point, an important point. Men of this world, in their dealings, are often more shrewd, and prudent than the disciples of God in their interchange with others. Much of the time disciples want to follow the flesh, and to play one-upmanship on their fellows instead of humbly loving and appreciating them for who, and what, they are in the great kingdom of heaven. Too often, reputed, spiritual men think others too ignorant or too stupid because they are not as materially blessed. It very well could be that those who are materially blessed are the ones spotlighted in the spiritual realm, to prove how they may, or may not, deal righteously with those things, to the benefit of others.

In any event, the application of Jesus to the Jewish people is clear: *"Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into the never-ending dwelling places."* How applicable this was soon to be for them. Moreover, it remains applicable to all of God's people today. Use the unrighteousness mammon (money) within your power to reach out to others in need. The time may well come when you will be that one, and others will remember your kindness and reach out to you. What a great way to steer life!

FOR THOUGHT: Does this incident and its application remind you of common sayings, such as what goes around comes around? What about the golden rule? Does it fit in here?

Do you believe tithing to your church is sufficient, and that the church should do the alms work with the money you give to it? May one fulfill alms work with things other than money? How? What are some acceptable ways people today could use mammon to make friends?

LEFT THY FIRST LOVE!

“Nevertheless, I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.”
Revelation 2:4.

The church of the Living God at Ephesus played a prominent part in the initial spread of Christianity as well as in the makeup of the New Testament. The book that bears its name features some of the best loved verses in the Bible.

The church was born in an idol-worshipping city, creating significant, violent protests, yet it was a tremendous work of the Apostle Paul, who went out of his way to pay it one last visit near the end of his free ministry. It was also home to the ministry of Aquila and Priscilla, and a preaching station of the Apostle Paul.

It was this writer's delight to visit the ruins of the ancient city which still bears ample evidence of its early prominence, including the remains of winding streets, shops, libraries, homes, and huge storage facilities for grain. There are remains of city laws engraved in stone in prominent places. Indeed, the ancient amphitheater that hosted a protest crowd of some 50,000 in the days of Paul is there together with remains of an ancient church house and deep-water baptistery. There are also the ruins of prominent brothels, speaking to the sensuality of the idol worship so prominent, water-cooled houses, epicurean regurgitation stations, and other indicators of material excesses of the day.

Again, the church is directly addressed in Revelation chapter two. The underscored criticism of it is that they had left their first love. Commentators, and other theologians, have conjectured just what that means, and often skewed it to their own thinking more than to contextual evidence.

It is abundantly clear that the church, and indeed the entire city, suffered from devastation of disease and earthquakes, yet the ruins of what once was, remains. Evidence abounds that what happened to the church at Ephesus is what continues to happen to churches throughout the age, they left their first love, and their candlestick was removed, even though they may have continued to operate religiously for a time. What is that first love? The same that we all have. It is love for the God of the Word, of whom we want to know more, from spiritual birth onward. Carnality often deals that a mortal blow. Do you love the Word more than this material world? How much time do you spend with it?

FOR THOUGHT: Where was Ephesus, and the other six churches mentioned in Revelation chapters two and three, located?

What do you think leaving their first love meant? Why?

Do you think that sin is being repeated in today's religious world?

What do you think would be a successful preventative of that?

LIBERTY VS. FREEDOM

“Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free . . .” Galatians 5:1.

Much is said these days about “liberty” and “freedom.” Often these terms are used interchangeably as synonyms. To be sure, there are areas in which distinguishing between the two might be difficult. However, each of these terms has its specific areas of meaning, as well as a wide berth of synonymous meanings.

Freedom is the larger term, which indicates lack of restraint in choices, actions, thoughts, etc. Liberty is more restrictive. It usually means freedom within a restricted area or zone. An illustration of this point may be its usage in military life. There are times when men in the military may have liberty. In these cases, the liberty may allow them to leave military bases to visit nearby towns or it may indicate base-wide liberty, but it does not include freedom to go home or to leave military service. The liberty is restricted in such cases by the one granting the liberty. Another illustration may be a courtesy granted. If your pastor were to visit another church, he might be granted the liberty to speak to the church. However, that liberty does not include the freedom to vote or perform other functions allocated to the pastor of that church. Hence, the liberty granted is freedom restricted to a specific function or purpose.

“Liberty” and “freedom” are Bible terms with which every Christian should be quite familiar. Perhaps the most famous passage is Leviticus 25:10 “*...proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof...*” James 1:25 calls the Bible the “*perfect law of liberty.*” That is, in a right relationship with God, man has all the liberty that can be accorded him within the restrictions of the love of God. “Freedom” or “free” is used much more frequently. Paul told the Romans, “*For when ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness.*” Rom. 6:20. He also said, “*Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness.*” Rom 6:18. Jesus said, “*Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.*” John 8:32. He also said, “*If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.*” John 8:36.

The greatest freedom with the greatest liberty in the governments of men are accorded the citizens of the United States of America. Thank God for this great country. However, the greatest freedom with the greatest liberty for all men everywhere is found in salvation in Christ Jesus, and in the teachings of the blessed Word. Paul said, “*Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free . . .*” Gal. 5:1.

FOR THOUGHT: Define in your own words the difference between freedom and liberty. How do the two ideas interact in Gal. 5:1?

Before salvation, one is said to be the servant of sin, but after salvation, he said to be free from sin, but becoming servants of righteousness. How do you explain this?

What does the admonition to “stand fast” mean to you?

LOAFING ONE'S WAY TO HEAVEN

"Therefore, we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life."
Romans 6:4.

God saves no one to loaf his way to heaven. He has a plan, a purpose for, and in, each of His dear children. Primary in that plan is obedience to Him! Biblical instructions are clear that the first step of obedience for a saved person is to follow Him in the watery grave of baptism; thus, to be raised to walk in newness of life. Rom. 6:4. Now some folks get all kinky on this subject. Some folks erroneously think baptism is essential to spirit salvation, and one is bound for hell without it! On the other end of that tangent, some think baptism is not important; that you can take it or leave it. Still others think that baptism is not a burial in water; that just a sprinkle in the face will do. Some apply it to infants who have no power of decision. The consistent New Testament pattern is that baptism is immersion in water of a professed believer by the authority of a New Testament church.

Jesus commanded His church to baptize the disciples it made. Matt. 28:18-20. This command is seen being faithfully carried out without deviation in the Holy Record. "Baptism" is a Greek word. It was not translated, purposefully by the KJV translators. Instead, it was transliterated (inserted bodily into the English language). It specifically means to "dip under or plunge." It is to symbolize a burial and resurrection, showing that the believer has died to sin, and is resurrected to walk in newness of life. Nothing but immersion could do that. It is the door to the fellowship of the Lord's church, and subsequent approved discipleship. Since no one has the authority to alter the Bible, the choice regarding baptism is do it man's way or God's way. I choose to believe the New Testament, and strictly follow God's way. Relinquishing the truth about this, or other Bible teachings, because the world wants it that way, is being spiritually lazy, and loafing the way to heaven. There will be a heavy price to pay for that.

FOR THOUGHT: Do you understand scriptural baptism to be ritually nice, or necessary to be obedient to the command of Christ Jesus?

If the subject or the method of baptism is changed from the Bible modal, what will happen to any scriptural church that does it?

Name at least four necessities for a scriptural baptism.

LOOKING UNTO JESUS

One of the great problems of life arises out of the allowances given to the eye. Jesus addressed this problem in His great sermon on the mount, Matthew 6:22-24, *"The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness! No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon."* Singleness of eye is the noblest goal. It is the fulfillment of the first and greatest commandment, *"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind."* Matt. 22:37.

Unfortunately, it is Satan's business to put seemingly endless options in everyone's pathway to claim the attention of the eye of desire. Being pulled by that desire allows darkness and indecisiveness to pervade the mind thus darkening the light of the body. What is one to do when life is not enjoyable, but hard, and filled with drudgery? It is so tempting to take the easy road, the more enjoyable way, for the flesh. How can we appreciate the sweet bye-and-bye when we are bogged down in the nasty now and now? There is only one appropriate and successful way to turn our eyes, and that is on Jesus. The writer of Hebrews 12:2 states, *"Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God."* Jesus walked through the nasty now and now in perfect faith. He emphatically despised, yes, despised, the shame of it all, but he did so for the joy that was set before Him, the joy of redeeming precious souls, making them fit subjects for heaven.

Perhaps the greatest admonition of the age is embodied here, "Looking unto Jesus...." In doing so, the eye is made single, and the whole body is filled with His glorious light. There is no attempt to deny a nasty now and now, but there is an emphatic promise that there is a sweet bye-and-bye for all who trust in Him, and follow His example of life. Is your eye single... or ... filled with the darkness of compounded objectives of no eternal profit? Lift up your eyes!

FOR THOUGHT: Children sing, "O, be careful little eyes what you see." Do you think all believers need to heed that simple warning?

Do you believe it to be important to turn away from inviting things if they are tempting to invade and reduce your personal relationship with God and His people? Why? Why not?

Why do you think so many believers succumb to temptations? Could it be that they are not looking unto Jesus for an example, or that they have not visualized the joy set before them?

LOVE, EVAPORATED OR ALIVE AND WELL?

“And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold.” Matt. 24:11-12.

The words of the above scripture were spoken by Jesus as He foretold conditions approaching the close of the present age. As He spoke this, the church was being cared for by His personal presence. It was totally Jewish, as it would be until sometime post-Pentecost. Notice the key words in the Greek New Testament writing, their import, meaning, and fulfillment in the present day.

“False Prophets” is “Pseudoprophetes” “false or lying prophets.”

“Deceive” is “Planao” “deceit, fraud, lead one cunningly away from truth.”

“Iniquity” is “Anomia” “not observant of rule or law; esp. that of God; anarchy.”

“Abound” is “Plethuno” “multiplied; multitudinous.”

“Love” is “Agape” “genuine love for God and His work.”

“Wax cold” is “Psucho” “to cool by blowing (process of evaporation.)”

For the first 1500 years of the Lord’s church, there was persecution from state religion. It never succeeded in eliminating it. So, the devil changed tactics beginning with the Protestant Reformation. Now, the church would be counterfeited again, and again, and again, practically without end. As those multi-viewed organizations permeated society, all claiming to be the Lord’s church, and engaging in evil and iniquitous practices, there would ultimately come discouragement and falling away by those who would rather listen to man than to search out answers from the Creator Himself.

Certainly, the conditions described by Jesus, and those evidenced by present day status appear to coincide. Who, then, will stand in this evil day, and in that near day of our King’s appearance, Whose question was, “When the son of man comes will He find faith on the earth?” Those who stand will be those who have sought the true answers, who are not content to hinge their eternal destiny with that of other religious sinners who may be as wrong as wrong can be. Certainly, the world is full of them, and they shall not stand when the Son of Man appears but will cry for the rocks and mountains to fall on them, to hide them from the face of Him Who comes.

To whom are you listening today? Is it Dr. Whizbang, or the Word of God? Has your love of God, and His Word waxed cold (evaporated)? It is time for each one to get into the Word. Let Dr. Whizbang answer to God for himself, which he most surely will, but he will not, cannot, answer for you! You, and you alone, will do that!

FOR THOUGHT: What do you think “wax cold” means, practically?

List at least three evidences of “waxing cold” that you see in your world.

Do you think entire churches are influenced by the actions of the world? Of other religions?

LOWING CATTLE AND BLEATING SHEEP

How blessed and marvelous is a dedicated church whose members are spiritually on fire for God! Their motive and purpose is to please God, and to influence others toward Him. They understand that Christ is the head of the church, the Savior of the body, and that His Word is sweet, and highly desired as the bread of life. In my mind, this was the status of the early churches of Paul's ministry. I think of Ephesus in particular having had the privilege of visiting that ancient city. Ephesus fell into decay and is no more. The zealous church that the apostle planted there is also gone, having suffered marginalization, persecution, and pressures from a godless, but religious society.

It is interesting to note that only a few decades after its birth, the church received a stern warning from Jesus in the words, "I have somewhat against thee..." Though commended for some spiritual assets, the charge must have been stinging to their hearts. They had busied themselves with religious activity instead of the necessary, personal one-on-one relationship with Christ Jesus; hence, they were told "... thou hast left thy first love." Rev. 2:4. Simply put, they were engaged in religion, but their motives were misdirected.

Could they turn a deaf ear to the Lord? Could they continue as a church that way? The answer is "yes," but they would not be a church belonging to the Lord Jesus. They must remember from where they had fallen, repent, or else they would lose their candlestick (be severed from Christ as His body).

This problem did not end with the Ephesians. It goes on in wholesale manner today. All of God's people need to re-think Samuel's confrontation with Saul when the king declared he had done the will of God. Samuel asked, "*What meaneth then this bleating of the sheep in mine ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?*" I Sam. 15:14. The prophet then replied: "... *Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.*" I Sam. 15:22.

Church activities may involve a lot of misdirected motives! But God is pleased when His people return to their first love, a personal relationship with God and His Holy Word. Forget the fat cattle and sheep, and the "sacrifices" to the Lord that cost you nothing!

FOR THOUGHT: How do sheep and cattle belie the spiritual heart of King Saul?

Since his motive was to offer them to the Lord, do you think Samuel was right to confront him about this?

Do otherwise well-meaning folks still substitute their thinking for the Word of God, especially when it does not suit them?

MATCHING HEAVEN'S RECORD

A most interesting statement is made in Matthew 16:19, *“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.”* Some erroneously think Jesus was giving those keys to Peter, but not so! Those keys were given to His church which the apostles then constituted.

A close look at the grammar of the statement causes one to understand the gravity of the church always doing the right thing. Grammatically speaking, in the original language, it literally says, “And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.” In other words, heaven gets it right every time, and is never wrong! The challenge is to the church to match heaven’s record all the time in all that is incumbent upon it to do, so it will be a match to heaven’s record in the day of the Judgment Seat of Christ.

Jesus taught His church what to believe, how to behave, and what to do, as well as what to reject. It is an awesome responsibility to teach the Word, and to teach it correctly. It is an awesome responsibility to live in transformation to the teaching of the Holy Word, morally, spiritually, doctrinally. As each church member excels in these challenges, the church of which he is a member excels as well. However, in so many cases, folks think, and act, as though the church belongs to them, and they can vote to do whatever they wish. Wrong! But, in that thinking, doctrines have been cast aside, discipline ignored or outright rejected, and appeals made to the world in the guise of making the church relevant to it. So, what have we done with the keys? Are they mainly cast aside for what we THINK will please God?

At the Bema Seat of Christ (judgment of His people for the sake of reward) some will be saved yet so as by fire, seeing all their life works burned as wood, hay, and stubble. I Cor. 3:9-15. Some churches will be surprised to learn that they are not a part of the Bride of Christ, having long since suffered their candlestick’s removal. I believe in going by the Book to match heaven’s record!

FOR THOUGHT: How does the grammar of the original language alter your thinking about what this verse is saying to us?

Do you think it will matter when the age is over, just how a church record matches that of heaven?

What do you perceive the meaning of the keys of the kingdom to be? Why?

MEALTIME PRIORITY

“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.” Acts:20:28

At times, the responsibility of a breadwinner is summed up as “He/she has mouths to feed.” That quotation, as well as the noun “breadwinner,” denotes why responsibility demands to be fulfilled. We labor at various vocations to put bread on the table; to bring home the bacon; to feed the hungry mouths. Whatever else responsible adults may provide for their dependents, and there are many things, it is basically reduced to that thought.

The shepherd is to feed the sheep. Truly, the shepherd provides protection from danger, shelter from the storms, etc. But the general well-being of the sheep is in their being well fed.

Is it any wonder then that this was the thrice emphasized duty that Jesus conveyed to Peter in John 21:15-17? Jesus’ reply to Peter’s answer to His questions, “Do you love me more than these?” and “Are you my friend?” was, “Feed my sheep!”

Moreover, the charge given to ministers in the meeting of the Apostle Paul with elders from Ephesus was, *“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.” Acts 20:28.*

So, even in the spiritual realm, ministerial responsibility is reduced to, “there are mouths to feed.” Pastors do well to take that responsibility seriously. Beating on an empty bucket may work on rare occasions, but when done repeatedly, the sheep fail to respond. What this means practically is that a pastor must give a large amount of his time in prayer, and in bible study to adequately preach the Word. Being saved sinners, pastors, as others, are prone to be tangential. Some love evangelism, others love doctrine, some love to socialize, still others love to spend time with family, friends, hobbies, etc. There is a time and a place for all honorable things, but one must prioritize and balance them. It is not easy, and the minister deserves, and desires, the prayers of God’s people that he may fulfill his role well. In light of specific statements in the above verses, ministers do well to prioritize properly by spending much time in the Word and prayer preparing to “feed the precious flock of God.”

FOR THOUGHT: How many hours do you think ministers devote to preparation of each sermon? Would it surprise you that the caring shepherd spends 6, 8, or 10? How many sermons does your pastor deliver each week?

How does sermon preparation and delivery manifest one’s love for Jesus?

MISSIONARY OR MERCENARY?

“And said unto them, It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves.” Matthew 21:13.

Repulsive is the thought that any member of the body of the Lord Jesus Christ may be less than he should be when measured against Bible teachings. But time and experience underscore the reality that many members fail, some miserably. Think about it!

Both Old and New Testaments are chocked full of failures in matters of faith. This is precisely why God had to become a man and do in the flesh what men could never do; hence, the jubilant meaning of grace! One scenario in particular seems to shout over the vicissitudes of time as a condemnatory warning to modern church saints. It is the wrath of Jesus toward the polluting merchandisers in the temple of God. Instead of it being a house of prayer, men had made it a house of merchandise. (Money, money makes the world go around, and the love of it is the root of all evil!)

One wonders just how deeply those fleshly aspirations with mammon are embedded into modern church life. Every member of the Lord's church is to be a missionary of the gospel, and a disseminator of its glorious hope, but it appears in many cases the prime directive has fallen prey to fleshly, religious big-I-tis (not a word), and more expensive buildings with their necessary social programs. Larger congregations tend to increase pressure to not offend with any hard truth, while moderating the pulpit by more remuneration for the moderate pastor, whose desire is for that to ever increase. Soon, the concrete of material mush hardens into an intractable, corporation of human goodness, which is unidentifiable as the body of Christ, except as men want it to be, by their own evaluation. The end product is easily seen as more mercenary than missionary.

The late Dr. Fred G. Stevenson, professor of Hebrew at Missionary Baptist Seminary, my alma mater, was heard to say more than once, “Boys, the worst thing that ever happened to the Baptist ministry is a regular, fat, paycheck for the pastor.” His statement must not be understood as the laborer being unworthy of his hire, but in the context of history, and in the ramifications of money fused into the ministry.

Each little step that separates and insulates ministry from those who sustain the minister is a step too far, and a propellant down the mercenary road. Ministers, churches, and parishioners would all do well to judge their status. Are you more missionary or mercenary?

FOR THOUGHT: What kind of balance should the ideas of “missionary” and “mercenary” exist in true New Testament churches?

What do you think is truer to the Bible model: a smaller church adequately supporting a pastor commensurate with the community, or a megachurch pouring millions of dollars into ministers for palaces and airplanes? Why?

MONEY, MONEY, MONEY!

“But what think ye? A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, ‘Son, go work today in my vineyard.’ He answered and said, ‘I will not.’; but afterward he repented and went. And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, ‘I go, sir.’, and went not. Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, ‘The first.’ Jesus saith unto them, ‘Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you.’” Matthew 21:28-31.

Describing his ex-wife, a hoarder of material things once said, “Money, money, money! All she ever did was ask for money!” “Well, how much did you give her?” asked a listener. “I didn’t give her any!” was the reply. Well, little wonder what happened next.

Some “Christians” are a lot like the coarse fellow. “Church, church, church! All I hear is how I ought to go to church!” “Well, how often do you go?”, asked a listener. “Well, I go all the important times,” was the reply, “like on Mother’s Day and Easter! Ain’t that enough?” So, what happens next?

Maybe the fellow dies. Maybe the church dies. Maybe the Lord comes back. There is no good future for the backslider who prefers this lousy, material world to the purposes of God in his life. Time and life given to God are extremely important! The gift of them is not obligatory to the knowledgeable, happy Christian. He realizes how blessed he is to have the opportunity to take part in holy, eternal things. He also knows life on earth is brief, but eternity never ends. In wisdom, he lays up treasure for his never-ending day.

FOR THOUGHT: When a dollar is given to God’s work, is it just a dollar, or has the giver given both a dollar and the earning power of that dollar for the rest of his life?
Is sharing time and money with God’s work a burden or a blessing? Why?

\NEEDED: B'NAI HASSEPHER

"Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." 2 Timothy 2:15.

B'NAI HASSEPHER: these are Hebrew words that translate "Sons of the Book." The need of such is underscored as the world races pell-mell to a grand finale, and as the pressure increases in churches, and among pastors, to be politically correct, non-offensive, and heavily involved in religious, social activities. Could it be described as a dumbing down of the churches in general? Little attention beyond a spiritual salvation emphasis is commonly given to the Bible. Think about it!

It is lamentable that such an obvious gap exists between modern ministers and those of a generation or two gone by. The former ones were B'NAI HASSEPHER, "Sons of the Book," much more concerned with the unity, harmony, and symmetry of the Holy Book being set forth than a psychology lesson on how to win friends and influence people for the enhancement of a religious, social group. While it is laudable that the basic tenets of the gospel are still often presented in most of our churches, the same may also be heard in any number of other churches, that would be regarded as heretical. One may attend any number of churches nowadays, and leave wondering what he may have heard that he would not have heard in several denominational churches. It is comparable to one excitedly hogging all the milk possible, but never having access to meat.

In a large number of preachers (about 500) a young college graduate extolled in psychological terms how pastors perform to benefit from increased membership in their churches. After so long a time, an older minister arose and loudly asked, "Is the Bible still our rule of faith and practice?" Upon hearing that affirmed, he went on to reply, "Well, then, isn't all of this just a bunch of foolishness?" It was! But there are too few who understand that today, and fewer who dare to stand up strongly to it.

A number of years ago, a fellow pastor of a large church confided in me that he was going to leave the ministry. Somewhat shocked, I asked why. He replied that he had preached all the sermons he could find in the book, and he was tired of repeating himself. Incredible! His inability, or unwillingness, to study THE BOOK, and believe what he found, then prepare it for a scrumptious meal for his congregation led him to the inevitable sickness produced by formal rituals and stale tables.

In times such as these, there is a crying need for true spiritual refreshment and nourishment that can come only from hearts submitted to God and minds studied up on His Word! Let social religion be for modernists. I appeal to all who take the name of our Lord unto themselves to labor to actually become B'NAI HASSEPHER, SONS OF THE BOOK! Let it be underscored that when it is time to cross the bar from which no traveler returns, the only thing one can take with him is what he believes. One cannot believe what he does not know. Thus, the pursuit and sharing of spiritual knowledge should be the prime directive of us all.

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think something is wrong when ministers get sermons from subscribed books or media evangelists rather than from God's Word?
What do you think to be an appropriate substitute for Bible study?

Do you agree that something is amiss in a Christian who has not learned anything new from the Bible in 20-40 years?

OFTEN, LITTLE IS MUCH

The sacrifice of two mites, the widow's offering at the Temple, is often brushed aside as not so meaningful to a people who are relatively wealthy, and who have access to resources should they fall on hard times. Luke 21:1-4. Rethink this, please!

A minister friend who decided to leave the ministry once told me that even though his paycheck from his church was not much, it became significantly larger when there was none at all coming in. Humm! Perspective! On another occasion I heard a fellow express appreciation to his friend, saying, "If I had a million dollars, I would give you half of it." "O.K.," said the friend. "Don't feel bad, just give me half of that hundred-dollar bill you have in your pocket." For some reason, the generosity of the fellow dissipated, and he refused. It is so easy to be generous with what you do not have, but much more difficult with that which you do have. This brings us back to thoughts on the widow's mites.

Truly the mites were extremely small, and of little value in what they would purchase. They would not buy groceries for the week or for a day, or even for a meal. But they did have value. Jesus Himself observed the offering that day. The bags of silver and gold that the well-to-do offered had great monetary value and would go far in the upkeep of the Temple. Nevertheless, Jesus' value system was foreign to them. He declared that the poor widow had given more than they all, not just more than one bag of gold, but ALL. To give willingly the last of one's resources, without any system in place to replenish them, constituted a great gift. Moreover, the purpose to which the gift was given underscored a heart of deep reverence and love for the things of God. It is not clear whether the poor woman ever knew that Jesus was watching and commended her, but she has been rejoicing in that reality for nearly two thousand years of her residence in glory now, and it will never stop.

The lesson is clear. God is pleased with the gift of a person's heart, and where the heart is, there will be the treasure also. Perhaps one's life, talents, treasures seem small in comparison to others who appear to have these things in abundance, but it is certain that in every detail of life, Jesus is observing, and He knows that little or much in man's estimation is relevant to one's total possessions. What so many do have in their power to give may seem small, but little is much when God is in it.

FOR THOUGHT: Is it possible that a large gift given by one who remotely follows the Lord may be considered small by Him, while a small gift given by one dedicated to following Him may be considered large?

Do you think the designation of "large" or "small" is relative to what remains in one's possession after making the gift?

Do you believe gifts to the service of God constitute laying up treasure in heaven? Why?

PERFECTION: A MIND GAME, OR POSSIBILITY?

An oft passed over, but most interesting statement of Jesus is the capstone admonition of Matthew Chapter Five found in verse 48, *“Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.”* Well, sober-minded folks are acutely aware of their shortcomings if not straight-out failures. So, the question must then be asked, is perfection an actual possibility for earthly disciples or is this a mind game statement urging them ever forward toward a noble, but unreachable goal? If it is a possibility, what does it mean, and how may one know if he has achieved such status? We have to think about this!

The context of the Sermon on the Mount (these scriptures) presents how one is to live before God under the covenant of grace in contrast to the covenant of law. The term, “perfect” does not mean to be without sin, but to be complete in understanding, and in practice of life of those tenets of the faith once delivered to the saints. In other words, to receive the Bible as ultimate truth, and especially its basic, doctrinal information about the sinfulness of all men; salvation by grace through faith, plus nothing; eternal security of the believer; deep water baptism of a professed believer at the hands of a New Testament Church, etc. These are foundational, but the Sermon on the Mount also calls upon us to live above the Mosaic Law in religious, moral, political, and financial observance as well.

These things are the mind of God revealed to penitent believers in New Covenant relationship with Him. Our Father in heaven is totally complete in all these things, and by His grace and submission to His Word, under the tutorship of the Holy Spirit, modern New Covenant disciples may be complete in knowledge, and in practice. Doing so is distinct emulation of the Creator. Moreover, those things are as right and approved of God in His people as they are in Him.

Thus of the many references of “perfect” and “perfection” in the New Testament, all meaning “completion,” perhaps the best summarization of the idea is found in Hebrews 6:1-3, *“Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto **perfection**; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this will we do, if God permit.”*

FOR THOUGHT: Do you use the word “perfect” to mean sinless or without flaw, or to mean the state of being complete? How does the New Testament use it?

God calls upon His people to be perfect. What does He mean by this? How may one achieve perfection? Is it instant or is it a process?

PLEASE DON'T PROSTITUTE THE CHURCH

"And here men that die receive tithes; but there he receiveth them, of whom it is witnessed that he liveth." Hebrews 7:8.

Doubtless, I will not endear myself to some readers with this article, but the church should not be prostituted. Let me explain.

A person is prostituted by selling his/her body for money, rather than working in legitimate enterprises to obtain it honorably. In other words, there is a right way and there are wrong ways to obtain both the necessities and the honorable desires of life. Extrapolate this into the world of churches.

God did not leave his church destitute of a plan of finance. There are necessities, program expenses such as mission work and some creature comforts to be provided in the normal operation of a church. Special projects, which, if a church determines to engage in them must be properly supported. So, if God has a financial plan for His churches, what is that plan? Simply put, tithes and offerings from the members of the congregation.

Often, one sees groups, young and old, hawking some service or product in the name of their church to accomplish some task. Truly, the task may be good, but to be reduced to "begging" the world to accept a product or service for money in the name of the church is tantamount to prostituting the church before the world instead of practicing the plan God gave it. Why do that?

Should a church sanction what it cannot or is unwilling to finance? If so, would it not be better for a group to agree to individually, or collectively, perform a service or sell a product as a simple business enterprise, leaving the church name out of it, then voluntarily give whatever is earned to the church for the project under consideration? This way the Lord would be pleased at selfless gifts and His church would not be esteemed a nuisance in that endeavor by a world that really does not care to be solicited. "But folks would not pay unless the name of the church is connected with it," some say. Exactly the point. The world is being solicited to support a church project when the members should be making that happen. Where is the honor for God in that type of action? It is simply ignoring His Word to substitute man's way. There is a biblical name for that sort of thing. It is called "Iniquity."

Narrow-minded? Maybe! But I do not apologize for having a high and holy regard for the wonderful church of the Lord Jesus Christ. God's people should do things God's way. And, please do not prostitute the church!"

FOR THOUGHT: Do you believe the Bible presents a God-honoring plan of church finance? Do you see a difference in people engaging in honest business transactions, then giving the proceeds to the church, rather than using the church's name to solicit funds, which people might not otherwise provide?

While some may not see soliciting the world as all that negative, is it better to follow Bible instructions rather than what seems O.K. to people? If not, where may the line be drawn?

POWER IN THE GRIT AND THE GRIND!

An accused and doubtless guilty woman was brought to Jesus, testing His judgment to give consent to the law that she should be stoned to death. Following pointed words that convicted everyone present of guilt, Jesus wrote in the sand. Did you ever wonder what He wrote? We cannot know for certain because it is not revealed, but whatever it was, those who read the words exited the scene one by one. Think with me about what that may have been in keeping with His Holy Word.

The woman was caught IN THE VERY ACT of adultery. She thus accrued the penalty of death under the Law of Moses. But Jesus saw through the stark hypocrisy of these miserable characters. We do not know for certain, but perhaps He wrote, "Where is the man with whom she was caught?" John 8:6-8. These hypocrites were altogether willing for the woman to be stoned to death, but especially willing to protect their guilty comrade. Oh, how their hearts needed to be torn with old-fashioned, genuine repentance!

Our Lord once said, ". . . *What is this then that is written, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner? Whosoever shall fall upon that stone shall be broken; but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder.*" Luke 20:17-18. So, there it is! Power in the grit of sand that Jesus used to form words that the accusers could not negate or circumvent and power in the Stone that grinds. The word of God is powerful. It is powerful from the pulpit. It is powerful from the written page. It is also powerful if drawn in the shifting grit of sandy, Judean soil.

Additionally, the power of the Word that leads men to repentance still breaks guilty hearts, stubborn wills, and remolds them to serve the Righteous Creator of heaven and earth. When they hear the Word and fall upon that Stone which is Christ the Lord, it happens. Conversely, those who fail to be so broken by His life-giving Word will find that Righteous Stone falling upon them in judgment, a fall of grinding proportions that will leave them as powder. Personally, I have opted for the power of the grit, rather than that of the grind. I join my Lord in pleading for all men to make the same decision in genuine repentance.

FOR THOUGHT: As Creator, and ultimate Judge of the universe, do you believe that the final destiny of every person will be by the power of God in life or in condemnation?

Do you think the mindset of people who brought the guilty woman to Jesus still exists in some folks who call themselves "Christian?"

Power in the Grit alludes to words written in the sand. Do you believe words still have power to change human hearts and minds? Name one instance of it happening.

PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY REVISITED

"Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth." I Tim. 2:4.

Practical Christianity, just what is it? Is it abundant, material things by which large buildings and programs may be built and offered within a community, or is it something else? Think with me about the words of the title.

A good dictionary will reveal that "practical" means "of, or concerned with, the actual doing or use of something rather than with theory and ideas." This seems to be a well put definition. However, when one seeks a definition of "Christianity," information flows all over the place, and most of it is far from practical. Consider that "Christianity" is a noun denoting that system of solid, biblical beliefs espoused by those who profess to be "Christian." These two terms derive their origin and retain their character as being Greek. When translated, the term "Christ" is the same as the Hebrew term "Messiah" both of which denote "an anointed one." This was the requisite of Old Testament priests and kings, which foreshadowed the New Testament Son of God, Jesus.

But Christ is not a part of the name of Jesus. He is Jesus, the Christ, or the anointed one. This anointing of Jesus was accomplished at His baptism, and the substance of the anointing was the Holy Spirit of God. Moreover, it was His good pleasure to confer that same anointing on His body, the blood-bought church, at Pentecost. Therefore, in context, a Christian is one who, by virtue of spiritual redemption, and submission to the leadership of the Holy Spirit is a part of that anointed, blood-bought body. This is to be inferred as one, who in keeping with those prerequisites, lives day to day life within the concepts of those premises. This certainly is far afield from the common usage of the term, but it is the truth of the term, and it has never been authoritatively used to convey the hodge-podge, often contradictory, tenets of fleshly religionists.

So, we consider "practical Christianity...." While theories may sometimes be entertained as catapults of thought, they are recognized as just that. Practical Christianity means of, or concerned with, the actual doing or use of biblical teachings. When that is applied to those who are called "Christian", it means those things of Holy Writ which add to a greater understanding, and its subsequent joy that the Creator has chosen to reveal to us of life here and now. Respect for His Word pleases Him, as does the joyful anticipation of hope He reveals to us of our immediate future. We revisit those things often, as should be done!

FOR THOUGHT: How would you define the difference between nominal Christianity and Practical Christianity?

Do you believe initial faith in Christ Jesus alone will mold one into a Christian if the rest of the Bible is ignored or worse, changed to fit a sinful lifestyle?

Should the believer be content with initial faith in Christ Jesus, or seek to follow Him according to His Word?

PRESENCE OF MIND

“Presence of mind.” I don’t hear it much anymore, but in years gone by the expression was used by many of the older generation. Describing appropriate actions of another, perhaps in times of crisis, great or small, it would be said that he or she “had the presence of mind” to act decisively and quickly. How good it is to have the “presence of mind!”

The halls of history are strewn with stories of those who did not have the presence of mind to avert, or to deal with disaster. Where were the minds of those in Troy who admitted the Trojan Horse into their city? Where were the minds of Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar that they were caught in utter dismay and calamity. Where were the minds of the defenders of this country on December 7, 1941? This could go on and on.

While books of instances of such absence of mind fill libraries, there is one small library of 66 books illuminating the path to the spiritual presence of mind, and its reward for eternity.

A spiritually present mind is a Christ-like mind. Phil. 4:8, *“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus...”*

A spiritually present mind is a renewed mind. Rom. 12:3, *“... be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind. . .”*

A spiritually present mind is a mind coinciding with others in the body of Christ. 1 Cor. 1:10, *“... but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.”* “Be of the same mind one toward another. . .” Rom. 12:16.

A spiritually present mind is a mind proactive in the service of God. 2 Cor. 8:19, *“... this grace, which is administered by us to the glory of the same Lord, and the declaration of your ready mind.”*

A spiritually present mind is a mind whose affections are set on holy things. Col. 3:1,2, *“If ye be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above. . . set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.”*

A spiritually present mind is a mind that is protected in sobriety. 1 Peter 1:13, *“Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober. . .”*

The devil is a counterfeiter, an illusion maker whose power lies in deceit. He walks about as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour by that deception. The weapon he cannot withstand is the truth! Truth, wielded by the presence of a spiritual mind, wins the victory over the devil every time. May we be quick to seek the grace of God in knowledge and employ what we learn of Him in every situation with the presence of mind!

FOR THOUGHT: Pick out the words or phrases above that describe a spiritual presence of mind.

How did earlier generations generally use the phrase “presence of mind?”

Do you think some Christians are so occupied with worldly things that they do not have a spiritual “presence of mind?”

How do you perceive the spiritual “presence of mind” in others?

PRESUMING ON GOD

“Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.” Psalm 51:10.

Man’s propensity to presume on the Creator God of heaven and earth appears to know no end, at least not in this age. Spurred on by religious charlatans who prey on the ignorance of folks, the name it and claim it crowd forges onward, full steam ahead. Let’s think about that for a minute.

God has shown His mighty power in times past to accomplish purposes within His holy will for a people, place, or thing. Here are a few of those displays of His mighty power aside from creation itself. He brought the mighty Egyptian nation to its knees, and its military to its destruction in ways so far removed from human thinking that it stands out in the minds of modern Christians as an all time, great, miraculous action. Shall we mention Joshua and the conquest of Jericho? What about Daniel in the lion’s den, or the three Hebrew children in the fiery furnace, or Elijah on Mt. Carmel, or Peter being released from prison, or Paul in shipwreck? On and on it goes for the Lord has wrought mighty works to show Himself, both to His people, and to the heathen.

So now, the world’s religious folks, in name only, presume that if God is the same yesterday, today, and forever as the scriptures declare, then all they have to do is call upon Him to do mighty things, and if He likes you, He will, but if he doesn’t, He won’t. So, they pick out an isolated incident like that of Jabez, and without the slightest idea of what that is all about, they beseech the Lord for personal riches or popularity which they can parlay into wealth and are perplexed that He does not answer them as they wish.

If God has done this before, and if He is the same, and if He really is no respecter of persons, why, oh why, does He not do it again for us, they ask. It may just be that they are asking God to become a respecter of persons and do for them what He is not doing for others. Then, there is the fact that they are asking amiss to consume it upon personal lusts, as James points out in his epistle.

This sort of thing bleeds over into the life of nominal Christians as well. Those who do not live a true Christian life will become ill or have some tragedy occur. Then they want the church to pray for them. For what? That they might have healing? For what? So that they might continue to pile up judgment against themselves by living a life of sin and iniquity rather than serving the Lord who bought them with His precious blood?

Enough presuming on God already! It is fruitless except in an evil way. Let those who would ask of God first surrender to Him and pray for grace that they might serve Him according to His will in the short time of this pilgrimage. It is the only fitting thing to do for one Who has saved us unto himself.

FOR THOUGHT: Should prayers be offered for any purpose, any time, or should one be careful to come before the Lord with penitent attitude and clean heart?

What did the psalmist mean when he said, *“If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me?”* Psalm 66:18.

Do you think people really do presume on God when they only acknowledge Him in times of trouble?

PRIESTS, PRIEST, AND A TORN VEIL

In the organization of religious practice in the Old Testament there existed a movable tabernacle, and later, a temple built on the same order. The two-room structure hosted an initial room known as the Holy Place. There was also a second room heavily veiled from the first. It was known as the Holy of Holies or The Most Holy Place. It was in this second room that the Ark of the Covenant was located. It was here that the high priest offered the blood of sacrificial animals for the sins of the people on Yom Kippur (day of atonement). It was here that a manifestation of Almighty God appeared from time to time. Busy priests ministered about the sacrifices of the people outside these structures and were admitted into the first room for specific purposes that had to do with the table of showbread, the altar of incense, and the candlestick. However, no one entered the Holy of Holies except the High Priest, and that after specific preparation, and for definite purpose at the appointed time.

Now these things are written for our admonition upon whom the ends of the world are come, I Cor. 10:11. The tabernacle and the temple are no more, but they and their service are types and symbols of present realities that must not be overlooked or forgotten. The Old Testament priests are a type of New Testament priests, which are bona fide, active church members, I Peter 2:5,9. The high priest of Israel is a type of our high priest, *"Who entered into the Holy of Holies in heaven with His own blood as a once-for-all offering for the sins of all who trust in Him, whereby He is able to save them the uttermost who come unto God by Him!"* Hebrews 7:25. *"But, as a high priest after the order of Melchisedek, rather than that of Aaron, He continues the service of high priest endlessly in that He is at the right hand of God, making intercession for us,"* Romans 8:25, Heb. 7:25. *"Moreover, we have not a high priest which cannot be touched with our infirmities, but was tempted on all points as we are, yet without sin."* Hebrews 4:15.

Upon the resurrection of our high priest from the tomb, the veil of the temple that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place was torn into two pieces, Matt. 27:51. The veil is no longer there to restrict New Testament priests from coming boldly before the throne of Grace with petitions for self and for others, and to find help in time of need. What a "hallelujah-type" privilege! The profound wonder of the age is that it is so little used. May God help us all to not be lazy, uncompassionate priests, but priests that are busier than the Old Testament priests ever were, serving, praying, teaching, ever learning, worshipping in spirit and in truth.

FOR THOUGHT : What is significant about the high priesthood of Jesus being after the order of Melchisedek, rather than the Levitical priesthood of Aaron?

Do you identify as a New Testament priest, the embodiment that Old Testament priests foreshadowed?

Do you believe the Bible teaches the New Testament priesthood is in local church context? Why or why not?

PRUNING AND GRAFTING: A REASON TO TAKE HEED

The eleventh chapter of Romans is a most interesting revelation of the Master Gardner's pruning and grafting. The information promotes great joy while being forward in stern warning. It speaks not so much of spiritual salvation as it does covenant relationship with God which is predicated upon spiritual salvation and obedience to Him.

The purpose of a special people of covenant relationship with God was begun in Abraham and concludes with the New Testament Church. Under the tutorial ministry of the Holy Spirit and the completed Word, the church brings saved men to their highest level of spiritual maturity, which qualifies them to rule and reign with Christ Jesus in the next age, the millennial reign of the Savior.

Ancient Israel was the object of that covenant relationship. First in promise to, and through Abraham, then in tutorial law from Moses to Christ Jesus. They were the branches of the holy root whose purpose was to bring forth fruit according to the nature of the root. Their abject failure to do so led to the nation being cut off from covenant relationship, even as branches severed from the tree. But did that mean God's covenant with them was a failure? No, it did not. There was a remnant of Jewish believers who came into New Testament relationship to Jesus. The first church was one hundred percent Jewish. But the nation was cut off because of unbelief. They failed to recognize their Messiah when He came to them, offering to them the kingdom of heaven. Moreover, they crucified Him as an imposter. Thus, were they severed from the holy olive tree.

The apostle underscores that their being cut off opened the door of that special relationship to the nations. Saved people all over the world have the grand privilege of coming into covenant relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ by baptism and fellowship in a local, visible, New Testament Church. Such people of the nations are said to be wild branches that are grafted into the holy olive tree, to bring forth fruit of the nature of the root. How long will the natural branches remain severed? Until the time of the nations be fulfilled. Then they will be grafted back into the holy olive tree. Until then they will remain in unbelief, and in spiritual blindness. The concern of the present population of the Lord's churches should be one of attention to avoid lethargy, spiritual sleep, and arrogance of their standing with Christ Jesus. Churches have been pruned from the Tree also and will continue to be as they become of like mind as ancient Israel. *"For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee."* Romans 11:21.

FOR THOUGHT: Does the pruning and grafting taught in Romans Eleven mean people are becoming lost again while some are being saved?

What is the difference between being spiritually saved and being in covenant relationship with God?

Do you think disobedient believers will enjoy the same blessings forever that obedient believers enjoy? If yes, then what is the purpose of the Bible?

What do you think Romans Eleven is teaching?

PUT IT IN THE BANK!

The message of Jesus is clear. Put what He has given you to good use for His glory, and for your own future reward. He tells the story of a lord placing one, five, and ten talents into the hands of his servants with instructions to use until he returned. Upon his return and reckoning with those servants, the ten-talent servant had gained other ten; the five-talent servant had gained other five. But the one-talent servant buried it and presented it intact to his lord. In anger, the lord commanded the talent be taken from him and given to the one who had gained ten. He chided the slothful servant, *“Wherefore then gavest not thou my money into the bank, that at my coming I might have required mine own with usury?”* Matt. 25:27.

In our time, some folks who clawed their way through the Great Depression of the 1930s never trusted banks again with their material wealth. Some found other productive ways to use it, while still others were content to bury it. A certain couple formed the habit of storing silver coins in jars, then burying the jars in several places on their property. In time, they fell victim to dementia, and forgot all about their buried wealth. Following their demise, their property was sold for business purposes. Land leveling machines unearthed these jars as the property was prepared for construction. They should have put their money into the bank where it could have drawn interest, and been used to bless their life, and perhaps the lives of others, too. Their determination to keep their wealth secluded and secretive is a sad, but oft repeated story.

In biblical terms extrapolated to modern times, talents are abilities, opportunities, deeds. God has given to each certain talents. But, some folks appear determined to keep their talents a secret even to the point of making it hard for one to find evidence that they are, in fact, a Christian. Others seem so ready to use what they have for God’s glory, even if it hosts obvious imperfections. Amen, to their kind! They are laying up treasure in heaven, and that is the best, most secure bank of the universe. Talents so used will draw the commendation of the Master and produce rich reward at the end of the way.

“Use it or lose it,” applies to a lot of things in life. So, don’t lose it, but use it!

FOR THOUGHT: What do you consider your talents to be with which you might honor the Lord?

Identify at least three of them.

In what ways could their multiplication be noted?

What are human qualities that the Bible values to be of great price?

Do you envision actually giving account to Jesus for what you have done with what you have?

RATTLING THE POTS AND PANS

In the many travels of Jesus, Luke 10:38-42 records an incident wherein a certain village Jesus was received into the house of a woman named Martha who had a sister named Mary. What happened there tells a lasting story of different mindsets, when focused on mundane, material things in contrast to spiritual things.

Martha busied herself with things she determined necessary to be a good hostess to a much-honored guest. Meal preparation was much more difficult in those days, and to set a pleasing table required not only planning, but much work. She threw herself into it.

On the other hand, her sister Mary seemed unconcerned about what kind of table was set or what would be the nourishment of the day. She simply wanted to sit at Jesus' feet and listen to Him talk. There were so many questions; so much to learn.

Finally, Martha could take it no longer. She said to Jesus, *"Lord dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? Bid her therefore that she help me."* The reply of Jesus is so clear and forceful, as in tenderness He answered, *"Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her."*

By our actions, we plainly display what is truly important to us. Many things are important enough to be done, but they do not have to meet a time schedule or be accomplished in a particular way, especially if they conflict with spiritual opportunities to learn and to worship.

The world passes away, and all that pertains to it. But the Word of God abides forever. It is by it, and it alone, that proper preparation is made for life both here and hereafter. *"Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her."* Let it be priority one to sublimate the earthly things that clamor for our attention to that good part which Mary chose.

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think it degrading that churches become known more about potluck dinners than spiritual meat?

Food for the body is needful, but how much does the value of spiritual food exceed it?

Did crowds follow Jesus after He fed five thousand with loaves and fishes from a little boy's lunch? Why did they cease following Him?

RECONCILIATION AND NONSENSE

The subject of reconciliation is heard across much of the religious world today. But it appears to be as much secular as religious, and in some cases outright nonsense. Think with me a minute.

Just what does the word mean in the context of current usage? Largely, it is calling upon churches to apologize to the black community for the sins of fathers many generations ago when slavery was common. The outcome hoped for is peace and acceptance with others who harbor ill feelings over the actions of that era.

The truth is that those who harbor such feelings are wrong to do so. They were never wronged, and the present generation never did them wrong that they should apologize. Moreover, history reveals that many black people owned slaves as well. Additionally, the Bible never condemns slavery as a way of life; rather it presents it as the ideal of relationship of man with God. The term “doulos” meaning bondsman, is an oft repeated New Testament term of obedient man’s relationship with God. Furthermore, one may repent of his own sins, but he cannot repent of the sins of another. The same is true of apologies. So, the whole thing is a farce!

The New Testament presentation of reconciliation is that of man being reconciled to God, which is possible only through repentance and faith in the merits of Christ Jesus, and the truth of His Word. If one is to enjoy the blessings of God by growing in knowledge and grace, he must be submissive, that is, reconciled, to the leadership of the Holy Spirit in connective terms of the Holy Word. Reconciliation measures one against the pattern set down in Holy Writ, and only that which matches is acceptable.

Reconciliation is not some high and lofty rule to which man always fails to attain, neither is it burdensome as some ascetics may indicate. Rather, it is a state which is beyond man’s reach entirely, but perfectly attained by the Man, Christ Jesus. Thus, faith in Him, His Word, His Person, His Work, will bring the spirit of a wayward sinner into the spiritual state of reconciliation with the Holy God. It is not that we achieve a level above all sin, but that our faith is counted as the Faith of Christ Jesus who did just that! Beyond that, we are given the blessed privilege of reconciling our day-to-day life to God, through understanding and application of the faith once delivered to the saints; hence, the apostolic plea, “. . . *as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God.*” 2 Cor. 5:20.

The theological presentation of reconciliation is beautiful, but as so many other terms and ideas, it may be twisted out of context and presented in a way never intended. Such is not the presentation of the harmonious scriptures, but the nonsense of a religious world that thinks it can deal with God’s Word anyway it wants.

FOR THOUGHT: How is it possible for condemned sinners to be reconciled to the Holy God? Does reconciliation go beyond initial repentance from sin to guidance of daily living?

It is easy to understand what reconciliation means as applied to one’s bank account, but does the righteous God have requirements so strong for human beings?

Does reconciliation mean living completely above sin in the flesh? What is to be done with such sins to remain reconciled to God?

REJOICE WHEN THE RACE IS FINISHED

The question is asked, is it possible to labor worthy of reward, then lose that which could have been received? Jesus answered one aspect of this question in Mark 9:4, *"For whosoever shall give you a cup of water to drink in my name, because ye belong to Christ, verily I say unto you, he shall not lose his reward."* There is no doubt but that a personal application is to be understood here. But there is another viewpoint every Christian should remember. It is stated in 2 John 8, *"Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward."* The apostle is here addressing churches of the Lord Jesus Christ. It must be noted that reward is never expressed in the plural number in the New Testament. This underscores that the church, the bride of Christ, is the principal inheritor of position, place, and standing with the bridegroom, Jesus. It also underscores that the greater meaning of reward is placement within that setting in the ages to come. So, the answer to the question is not simple, but compound. There is something that will not be lost, yet there is much to lose in failure to follow the Lord in accordance with His Holy Word.

A number of years ago, some of the swiftest runners were engaged in a race. One was in a comfortable lead as the finish line approached. It was then that a photographer called to the front runner to pause a second for a world class photograph before crossing the line. Feeling he had the time, the runner paused for the photo, but in doing so another overtook him and won the race. The runner thought the race was his, but distraction caused it to go to another.

The Christian race is not over until the finish line of death or the rapture is crossed. Until then, there is much to lose, much to win. It is illustrated by an old country adage, "don't count your chickens until they are hatched." Patience is required to keep on keeping on in the faith once delivered to the saints, but so soon the race will be irrevocably over. Then, what is, is! Until then, *"Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So, run, that ye may obtain."* 1 Cor. 9:24. So, onward let us run, content for glory to come later!

FOR THOUGHT: To whom do you think the majority of warnings in the scriptures are given? To the lost world or to the people of God?

Why should warnings be given to those who have been eternally saved?

Does reward make any difference in life now? Will it make a difference in life in eternity?

Are there good, discernable reasons why the Bible urges Christians to be dedicated, active, and big believers in the Bible?

RESIST THE DEVIL, HOW LONG?

Most folks understand a lifestyle of resistance to be negative, and they want little or nothing to do with it. After all, “you gotta accent the positive, eliminate the negative, and don’t mess with Mr. In-between!” Hey, that might make a song! Has it been forgotten that a positive cannot exist without a negative? Think about this with me.

Consider little Johnny. He is playing in the street. Mom yelled through the screen door, “Johnny, get out of the street!” Johnny sees this as a negative, and he does not know what to do next. In a few seconds he is right back in the street. Replay this scene. Mom yells at Johnny, “Johnny, get out of the street, and go play in the backyard.” Now the negative has been balanced with a positive, and Johnny will go play in the backyard (at least for a few minutes).

A negative Christianity alone will not work. Yet so many pride themselves in not lying today, or not cursing today! Those vices are sure to return ... soon! But consider what the verse of scripture under consideration actually says: *“Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”* James 4:7. The call to actively resist a negative, has been counterbalanced, and the person empowered by the positive, first part of the statement, “submit yourselves therefore to God.”

Now, consider Jesus. Immediately following His baptism, He was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. In every temptation the Devil thought he could use to allure Jesus to sin, Jesus successfully resisted with the Word of God; even specific scriptures which He quoted to win the victory.

God’s people may also know sweet victory over temptations when they first submit themselves to God and to His Word. In doing so, they will not only resist successfully, but they will also enjoy the righteous peace and sense of goodness and blessings that comes in each victory.

Some resist in their own power once or twice, then give in, sometimes because that is what they wanted to do in the first place. This does not underscore the weakness of God, but the foolishness of the flesh. So, how long should one resist? Resist until the devil leaves you. Don’t worry, it will not be long. He has other fish to fry and he knows he cannot win over a Bible quoting, Bible believing Christian.

FOR THOUGHT: What do you think of the power of balancing negative commands with a positive one?

Do you see this principle employed in the scriptures? Can you produce at least three of these that were spoken by Jesus?

RETHINKING THE TALE OF DEAD MEN

The proverb heard over and over is, “dead men tell no tales.” However, practical evidence abounds that this proverb is wrong, and needs to be righted. “Dead men do tell tales!” Think with me for a moment.

An estimated fifty thousand martyrs since the days of Jesus on earth testify that the Christian faith is worth dying for. Moreover, the uniform stones of a military cemetery declare that democracy and freedom are worth dying for. There is much biblical evidence that “dead men do tell tales!”

Wisdom comes to us from the voices of those who have gone before us. What is most important to them will be most important to each of us. So, what is the tale that dead men tell?

They tell of the foundational character of faith, that it is essential to salvation. Eph 2:8-9. That it is essential to a good relationship with God, Heb. 11:6; and that it is first in the order of spiritual gifts. I Cor. 13:13. Additionally, everything that is not of faith is sin. Rom. 14:23.

Dead men tell us of the potential power of faith in the believer. Matt. 17:20. And of its importance at death when the claim of the grave, the great equalizer of earthly distinctions, will not be denied. Here, genius, heroics, wealth, statesmanship, invention, philanthropy, etc., all fade into the background, and the all-important issue is, was this a person of faith in God?

Who are these dead men who tell such tales? Just to name a few, consider Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob, Joseph, Moses and his parents, Joshua, Rahab, and an innumerable host of others. Hebrews 11:4 points out Abel, who by faith offered a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, “. . . *by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and by it he being dead yet speaketh.*”

Furthermore, there is another who speaks through the vicissitudes of time. It is a certain rich man who lived contemporarily with Lazarus. Luke 16. Millenniums of time have come and gone, but he still is desirous of a drop of water on his burning tongue. He wants to warn others to not follow his path. Truly, dead men do have a tale to tell. Wise people listen and act appropriately.

FOR THOUGHT: What do you think of the tales that dead men tell?

Are these tales good philosophy, good preaching, or true warnings about real, eternal life?

If all one may take with him out of this world is what he believes, how high on the priority list should faith be?

How do you think the ancients were able to accept martyrdom?

SAVORING THE SLOP

“ And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.” Luke 15:16-19.

Luke 15 records the familiar story of the prodigal son. When his substance was wasted, and no man gave him the needful things of life, he resorted to feeding the hogs for another, and would dip his hand in the slop bucket to eat some of the husks intended for pigs. It is so sad that he had to stoop to such a low level before realizing that real help and true love awaited him in his father's house. But sadder still is the continuous replaying of this story in modern times.

There are many human traits fostered far and wide as substitutes for the true blessings in the Heavenly Father's house. One is philosophy of the power of positive thinking. Oh, to be sure, there are some good things in this world that one may achieve in the power of positive thinking, but when one tries to extrapolate that into spiritual realities that come from God, it becomes a slop bucket. A few years ago, there were some notable preachers who made that theme to be the crux of their ministry. It sounded good to unspiritual ears. It pandered to those who prized self-sufficiency and despised repentance. Then after serving up a homily on the subject, those purveyors of spiritual poison would smile like a wave on a bucket of slop. Those who have slopped hogs in earlier years have no trouble visualizing this.

But if there are some good things in the power of positive thinking, what is wrong with such messages, one might ask. The Bible message is that there is no innate goodness in mankind. He is by nature a hell-bound sinner, and only the salvation wrought by the Lord Jesus Christ on the Cross of Calvary can change that. So, repentance and faith are the requirements, not the power of positive thinking. The apostle Paul explained this idea, and legalism in general, as *“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. Such are the ornaments of the broad way that leads to destruction. The way of life is the narrow way. Christ must be the foundation, the head, and everything in between. Otherwise, it is spiritual slop. I don't want it, won't have it, and even the pigs may have a real problem with it.

FOR THOUGHT: If what is taught in the name of the Lord is not Biblically supported, it is a lie. Is it then any better than spiritual slop, or could it be worse? Why?

Why is it that people will follow the sorry lifestyle of the prodigal son at the pigpen?

Do you think an awakening to the blessedness of spiritual life with God is a natural phenomenon or is it God who initially reaches out to fallen man? What is your personal experience?

SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES

It was once commonly believed, at least in the South, that no education was complete that did not include a sound and comprehensive understanding of the Holy Bible. It is not clear just when or where that fell by the wayside, but it is still cornerstone truth.

Centered in the first-floor hallway of the old facilities of Missionary Baptist Seminary on Asher Avenue in Little Rock, Arkansas, was the embedded seal of the school bearing the slogan: “Eronata Tas Graphas” or “Search the Scriptures.” The well-known admonition of 2 Timothy 2:15 is “study” in order to be approved a workman who need not be ashamed, but who rightly divides the Word of Truth. That was heavily emphasized as the sole purpose and mission of the institution. Accordingly, for decades, it has been the pleasure of this writer to further emphasize Proverbs 25:2, *“It is the glory of God to conceal a thing: but the honour of kings is to search out a matter.”* Correct Bible knowledge does not come easily or quickly, but its acquisition is the greatest treasure any mortal will ever have, and it is not, nor will it ever be, mortal! My friend and esteemed brother in Christ, Jim Harris of Florida, wrote the following words that I am pleased to pass along to you.

“God planted a vineyard of truth that requires the believer to harvest its fruit. God buried gold in the mine of the Bible that requires the believer to dig it out. God embedded light, direction, and guidance in Scripture that requires the believer to search for it.

The Bible is not fast food for the drive-thru Christian. It is not slogans and terminology coupled with pictures of the sunrise or the beach posted on social media. The Bible requires work to understand. It requires time to get to know. There is reward beyond comprehension in the understanding of this book. It is not a delicate, fragile volume. It is the foundation upon which the world stands. It is the workhorse of human history. It has been attacked, berated, belittled, and hated, yet it stands as true and trustworthy as it was in the days the ink was still wet. It speaks the truth because it is the truth. It can be completely, fully, eternally trusted.” Amen, Brother Jim Harris! I could not have said it better!

FOR THOUGHT: How important is Bible knowledge today to an excellent education? Why? Do you think a lot of Christians esteem the Bible as a “take it or leave it” proposition? Do you think it is all right for folks in the pew to be ignorant of the Word so long as the minister or pastor is well educated? Why? Could it be that accountability of one’s life to Jesus at Judgment will go through a pastor or friend, or will it be strictly on a personal basis?

SEEKING KNOWLEDGE OF RESURRECTION POWER

There is an attainment in life that is alien to planet Earth. It outranks all other possible possessions in worthiness of pursuit. Among men, gold, silver, diamonds, and pearls are universally accepted as wealth, and the years of life are given to acquire them and what they represent. But there is another that pales the treasures of earth. Think with me for a minute.

Prerequisites are essential to the ability to pursue the treasure of which I write. Being born from above and committed to obediently following God in New Covenant relationship are those prerequisites that open the door to that opportunity. Think of it in the context of the apostle Paul.

God used Paul as He did no other. Paul also had things men seek in life, the best education, friends in high places, and rank in his Pharisaical world, to name a few. Yet, in Philippians Chapter Three, he listed some of those, but went on to say they were all counted but loss, even as a pile of dung, in comparison to the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus. He wanted above all other things to know Him better, and especially the power of His resurrection.

At the Easter season, the world called "Christendom" celebrates the resurrection of Jesus. But few understand its possibility. Jesus was a man, but He was also the Creator God of the universe. Since the wages of sin is death, it was possible for the man Jesus, who knew no sin, to die, only because he voluntarily took upon Himself the sins of men. Although the man Jesus was formed of flesh and blood of this world, the life in the man Jesus was the eternal God Himself. It is not possible for Him to die. But it was possible for the God who lived in the man Jesus to voluntarily exit, then re-enter, the human body of Jesus, changing it into a glorified state. That has specific and profound meaning to His people.

The Spirit of the Living God which dwells in His people is life, and it is not possible for it to die. To this point Jesus forthrightly declared: *"And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?"* John 11:26. The everlasting life Jesus gives to those who repent of sin and accept Him as their personal Savior begins at the moment that happens. It never ends and cannot end because it is everlasting. What that means is that though death claims the flesh on earth, the life-force or spirit returns to God who gave it, to await the command of the Master to reunite in a glorified body like unto His own. The interim is not inactive, but chock full of glorious awareness that pales that of earth. Hallelujah! We join Paul in pursuit of a better knowledge of that, his prime directive. He lives! We live!

FOR THOUGHT: Is it reality or just good preaching that there is much to know about the process of salvation of the total man?

If Paul realized there was much to learn that he had not apprehended, is that not true for us? Do we do ourselves a disservice by simply acquiescing to our ignorance rather than seek to understand the marvelous spiritual possibilities?

Do you think Christians today count anything at all as loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ?

SELL ME THIS POWER

“But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you:. . .” Acts 1:8.

In biblical Christianity there is power! Saints sing of it often in such hymns as “There Is Power in The Blood.” Repentant lost people rejoice in it at the altar of their heart. Saints who are wise reject the time-consuming offerings of the world in favor of knowing Him and the POWER of His resurrection, as did St. Paul, as he told the Philippians.

Jesus said that all power is consolidated in Him, as He commissioned the church in Matthew 28:18-20. Just before ascending into heaven, He told His church that they would receive power after that the Holy Ghost was come upon them. According to Acts 2, they certainly did. But it was not a temporary power. It was an age long power to be resident in New Testament churches; power sufficient to bring them through the age with the proper testimony of God, and His love for the world.

But power is one of the objects of the sinful, greedy world which sees material advancement as the purpose of life. Thus, the very existence of understood power draws men either to God and salvation, or to Satan and the ladder of materialism and creature comforts.

Such was the case of one Simon the sorcerer, as noted in Acts 8. It is interesting to note that Simon was a long-time practitioner of sorcery. Doubtless, he accumulated a considerable amount of wealth with it. However, the introduction of Bible Christianity in Samaria was mightily blessed of God, so that many were saved and baptized. Make of this what you will, the Bible declares that Simon also was saved and baptized. Simon then continued with Philip, drawn by the miracles which he did.

Some days later, Peter and John were dispatched from Jerusalem to Samaria, who prayed for them, and laid hands upon them; and they received the Holy Spirit that had come upon the church in Acts 2. Simon was impressed, so impressed that he offered the apostles money to have their power conferred upon him. Peter minced no words rejecting the request and directing him to repent of such wickedness. 8:22-24.

Unarguably, the apostolic years were filled with extraordinary displays of holy power as credentials of holy men in the absence of the completed New Testament. But with its completion, focus is shifted more precisely upon the church of the Living God. It is the pillar and ground of the truth, under the constriction of the Holy Spirit and the eternal Word. In these things there is staying, aggressive, authoritative, energetic power from heaven. Surely, the world remains filled with satanic inspired charlatans, who emulate Simon, saying, “sell me this power that I may accumulate wealth through deception.” But, as it was then, so it is now. The gifts and calling of God may be only enjoyed God’s way. They are not for sale.

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think there are marketers presently who are selling religion? Why was the apostle Peter so blunt and possibly harsh in answering Simon? Do you believe life in eternity depends on what is done with life here and now? Is it possible for saved, but untaught people to make serious spiritual errors?

SERVING GOD AND MAMMON OR SERVING GOD WITH MAMMON?

The most interesting story is related by Jesus to His disciples in Luke 16:1-9. Read it! It is the story of the unjust steward. No small number of misinterpretations have come from that story, particularly from those who seek to justify themselves in wallowing in materialism and/or dealing in less than honest transactions. The lesson is pungent! The point is unmistakable to those acquainted with the Word. Think about it with me!

Center stage, or the protagonist of the story, is a steward (manager of the affairs of another). He was not just a steward, but it is emphasized that he was an unjust steward, charged with mismanagement of his lord's material goods. Realizing his stewardship would soon end, he initiated action to encourage at least partial payment to his lord while making friends of the debtors who would look upon him kindly in his time of need. Ultimately, his own lord commended his wise, though personal actions.

It is here that Jesus makes an application. The children of this world are wiser in their generation (kind, type) than the children of light. Now hold on just a minute! Why would Jesus make such a statement? First, He said it because it is true. Everything Jesus said is true. Secondly, the unjust steward took care of himself, favoring others through the crafty use of mammon. Jesus is saying to His disciples, and to us all, that we cannot serve God and mammon, but we can and must serve God by the wise use of mammon. This is not serving mammon, rather it is making mammon to serve God and man. The practical form that takes is, in the words of Jesus, "Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness." In simple, modern terms, He is saying to use money wisely to make friends because one day you will probably need what others can do for you.

Some would have folks to believe that the only way to serve God with money is through church offerings. Not so! James 1:27 states that pure religion, that which is undefiled before God, consists of visiting (helping) widows and orphans. Use mammon then to serve God in that way. Truly, the parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us that much service that is pleasing to God consists of helping others in their time of need. Christians must not forget that although the first great commandment is to love God, the second is like unto it, love thy neighbor as thyself. This year, discover the joy of practically serving God in accordance with the first two great commandments.

FOR THOUGHT: As a Christian, does not all you have, or may have in the future, belong to God?

Did God not require a tenth of increase from Israel in the Old Testament?

Does not the New Testament teach us to do more if our service to God is acceptable?

Name two specific experiences of joy you found in helping others.

SHUT-IN OR SHUT-OUT??

"Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able. When once the master of the house is risen up, and hath shut to the door, and ye begin to stand without, and to knock at the door, saying, Lord, Lord, open unto us; and he shall answer and say unto you, I know you not whence ye are: Then shall ye begin to say, We have eaten and drunk in thy presence, and thou hast taught in our streets. But he shall say, I tell you, I know you not whence ye are; depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out." Luke 13:24-28.

To whom do these sobering sayings apply? They are identified as religious folks who ignore willfully the teachings of the Holy Word in favor of what they consider desirable and nice. Here, Jesus is not talking about spiritual salvation, rather about salvation of the mind-life, or reward, of those who are spiritually saved. While it is called TODAY, men have the opportunity to enter the strait gate of heaven's imparted way of righteous living. There will come a time when that opportunity will be forever gone. It will be then that men who are spiritually saved will seek a place of honor in the millennial kingdom of the Lord but will be told that they were never in an approved relationship of service with Him. They are saved people, or else they would not be there asking or knocking. However, Jesus simply refers to them as "workers of iniquity!" That term specifically means procedure without regard to accepted instructions, or simply anarchy or lawlessness in spiritual matters.

So, some will be blessed to come from the east, west, north, and south, and sit down in the kingdom with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Also, some who seek to do that, thinking they have a right to that privilege, will be thrust out of that blessed setting. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth among those who finally realize the Bible is the accepted rule of faith and practice, and not themselves. Indeed, there is reward; there are blessings which some will have, and others will be denied, based on the obedience of their life to God's Word. On that day, some will be shut-in, others will be shut-out (no, not out of heaven, but out of places of honor in the kingdom). While it is TODAY, let us all hear Jesus and strive to enter the strait gate and narrow way.

FOR THOUGHT: What does the "strait gate" represent to you?

If it is thought to be spirit salvation which is by grace alone, how could "striving" be a part of it?

If one is to strive to enter, does that not mean continued learning and walking in the things that are of the Lord as presented in the New Testament?

May one be thrust out of a place of honor in the kingdom of heaven and still be saved?

How may these questions be reconciled?

STANDING FAST: IN MODERN TIMES

Not a few ministers can tell of perceived pillars in the church who assured them that in the event of disturbance over an issue they would be there, right behind them. But, when disturbance actually came, they were behind them all right, maybe forty or fifty miles. Such is the failing of the flesh, even as Peter found out when avowing to never desert the Lord, only to find himself denying Him while warming by the enemy's fire.

Wisdom would have all of God's people to realize their weaknesses and seek heavenly strength to stand for the Lord when such need arises. The beloved apostle Paul wrote to several churches in his epistles about their need to know to Whom they belonged, and to seek the ability to stand when standing really counted. To the churches of Galatia, he wrote, *"Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage."* Gal. 5:1. To the church at Ephesus, he wrote, *"Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness."* To the church at Philippi, he wrote, *"Therefore, my brethren, dearly beloved and longed for, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, my dearly beloved."* Then to the church at Thessalonica, he wrote, *"Therefore brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle."* 2 Thess, 2:15.

To illustrate this admonition, a little boy climbed onto a very poor, old horse .sway-backed with ribs protruding. But the horse was to him a most beautiful animal. A neighbor, given to making fun, asked him if his horse was a racehorse. The boy answered, "No." Then the man asked if he were a work horse. Again, the boy answered, "No." Next, the man asked if the horse could run fast. The boy answered, "No sir, he cannot run fast, but he sure can stand fast."

As God's witnesses there is an underscored need for us all to resist the din, noise, and perceived gaiety of the world, and stand fast in the marvelous liberty with which Christ Jesus has made us free. This is accomplished by clinging to a proper understanding of the inerrant Word.

Revisiting the apostolic admonition to the Ephesians, we hear again the precious Word, *"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."* Eph. 6:13-14. Then here is the most appropriate admonition for then and now!

FOR THOUGHT: What does "standing fast" mean to you?

Name at least four Bible teachings for which a Christian should always stand fast.

Does a specific, one time, failure to stand fast mean one cannot stand fast? Explain!

What are some common, yielded to temptations that would keep one from standing fast?

STOPPING THE PRAYER STOPPERS

In the field of communications, what would you give for a direct line to the Creator of the universe? Well, by His grace, that is what Christians have, and it is better, far more reliable and productive than a cell phone. Who would ignore, discount, or willingly not use such a connection? Yet, some complain of unanswered prayer. So, just what is it that could be responsible for prayers being divinely marginalized? Think about it!

Perhaps it could be as ancient Isaiah reported to Israel in Isaiah 59:2, "Your sins have hid His face from you, that He will not hear." Dare one approach the throne of grace harboring unrepented sins? They are prayer stoppers! King David of old said in Psalm 66:18, "If I regard iniquity (religious activity and beliefs foreign to the scriptures) in my heart, the Lord will not hear me." Iniquity is a widespread, grievous error, doing things one's own way instead of specifically God's way. It is the assumption man fabricates, and proceeds upon, as the will of God. It is a prayer stopper!

Furthermore, God gave some negative information to Jeremiah about his own praying for Israel. *"Therefore pray not thou for this people, neither lift up a cry or prayer for them: for I will not hear them in the time that they cry unto me for their trouble."* Jer. 11:14. Their communication had been cut off because of their sins, judgment was about to fall, and the godly prophet who could effectively pray was not to pray for them. They had repeatedly employed a prayer stopper.

What to do? The answer is obvious. Realize that prayer is not a birthright, and God is not a messenger boy anxiously awaiting a call of whatever from whomever.

Prayers that are heard come from those of a penitent attitude, and of a contrite heart. This state of being is befitting any approach to the very Creator-Redeemer of the universe!

FOR THOUGHT: What is the problem with prayers that are only offered in times of trouble by people walking far afield from the teachings of Jesus?

What did David mean by his statement in Psalm 66:18?

Should prayer always begin with a confession of sins, and a true readiness to do God's will?

What do you believe to be prayer stoppers? Name some!

TARRYING BY THE STUFF

“And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his several ability; and straightway took his journey.” Matthew 25:15.

Three references are hereby made regarding the idea of “tarrying by the stuff.” Please think with me about them!

First is the setting of the terminology in I Samuel 25 and 30. King David went to war with 400 men but left 200 to abide by the stuff. In the parting of the booty, some wanted to exclude those who tarried by the stuff, but David said their work was important and they would receive an equal share.

Second, the story Jesus told regarding a lord who took a far journey, but parted his goods among his servants, with instructions to “occupy until I come.” Some doubled their allotment while one hid his, so as not to lose anything. His action was denounced rather than commended, and he lost what he might have profited from his master. In each case, whether the term employed is “tarry” or “occupy”, the idea is the same. Both terms indicate one is to be present, on guard, and active in the responsibilities given.

Third is the application of the above terms and actions to our great country, the United States of America, whose independence we celebrate. It has been the lot of some to go to war to gain its independence, while others fought to keep it. But what about the rest of us? It is our lot to occupy, to tarry by the stuff (the principles of freedom) in which we so lavishly bask. What kind of job is being done in that occupation, in the tarrying. Those who tarry by the stuff must not abandon it to the wanton raiding of others, nor bury it in hopes of preserving it.

Finally, all who take the name of Christ Jesus to themselves are called both to fight a good warfare, and to tarry by the stuff, occupying until the Lord comes. This writer believes it impossible to accept as optional the commands of Christian service in all of its various forms, including Bible reading, church attendance, prayer, and witnessing. This is the stuff of our warfare against principalities and powers. This is the stuff we are to occupy for increase for the Master. There is no commendation for those who bury their stuff.

May God give us all a renewed sense of urgency to occupy in faithful activity; to tarry guardedly and rightfully by the stuff that is given to us of heaven itself.

FOR THOUGHT: Have you ever thought of your lot in life as one who should be faithful to “tarry by the stuff” (principles) as keeping faith with those who gave the last full measure of devotion? Name some of the things you think those who have died would want you to be faithful to do. How important is it to you that you are found faithful in “tarrying by the stuff?”

THE CHISEL

In communication exchanges of life experiences with my dear cousin, Sandra Thieme, of Colorado, she mentioned the idea of a chisel. I cannot get this off my mind, mainly because it makes so much sense. Accordingly, I attempt to expand on that idea for my own analysis and I hope it may make some sense to others who read these lines.

How prone we are to live life to the fullest, but as much as humanly possible within our comfort zone. When something invades our comfort zone, it is always by an external force, and not of our own making. We are secure in who we are, identify ourselves by the peripheral things and people around us, especially those we have known for a lifetime.

When a parent, sibling, or child dies we feel ourselves chiseled. But we must understand that we really are as a sculptured work of art, fashioned by the Master Artist, and fully realize that He is not done with those of us who remain. When one of my children was still-born, it was as a chisel strike that I would have avoided at all costs, but one that brought more clearly into focus the fashioning of my life by my loving and righteous Creator-God. When a mid-life crisis struck, the chisel had never struck so hard and so painfully to shape my life to solely depend on my loving Sculptor. Then dad died in 1987. The chisel struck again, painfully, but masterfully, further defining what I am to ultimately become. When mom died in 1988, it was a chisel blow. When my sister died in 2000, the chisel struck again. She was the first of my siblings to cross the bar, and I felt so vulnerable; that there was less of me than before. Then, my brother, just older than I, succumbed to a massive stroke, and I again felt the strike of a chisel. There was love between us, even though we were not so close in later years as we had been as youngsters growing up. Since then, the chisel struck again as my oldest brother died. For so long, all these precious people were there, and I knew it, and to some degree depended upon it. It was my comforting, self-definition of life. In their absence, I feel the chiseled blows from which no one is immune, even ministers of the gospel.

I do not seek immunity from the chisel, nor do I lament each blow, as it may appear that I do. It is just that life is ever changing, and those who love the Lord will feel the chisel as He uses events of life to channel us into complete trust, and comfort in Him, rather than in the people and things that surround us. One day the Master Sculptor will be done with the chisel, and changes will cease to occur, for we shall see Him as He is, because, at last, we shall be like Him. Until then, may God give each of us the strength and grace to be still, and to cherish each blow of the chisel in the comforting knowledge of what He is doing to, and for, each one of us. 2 Thessalonians 3:5.

FOR THOUGHT: What life events have occurred that you consider the blows of a chisel?

Name some that were hard to accept and make adjustments.

Do you see yourself being shaped with every chisel blow that occurs?

Do you trust God to shape you into the most glorious work you can be for His glory?

THE CHURCH-GOING GENERATION

“King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest. Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.” Acts 26:27-28.

From early days, the United States of America has been generally known by the world as a Christian nation. To be sure, there were many times and episodes in its history that would bring that idea into question. Still, following the great revivals of the early 19th century, that label largely stuck, but predominantly in the Southern Bible belt more than in the other regions. This will draw some flack but hear me out.

A few years ago, the president of the United States stood before a gathering of leaders from many nations and forthrightly declared that America was NOT a Christian nation. A fire storm of repudiation ensued from folks at home.

I shall refrain from the many temptations of digression that present themselves for the greater purpose in mind. Could he have been correct? I think it all depends upon what one considers a Christian to be.

To perhaps 90% of what is called the “Christian World” the definition of a Christian is one who confesses that Jesus is the Son of God. Truly, repentance from sin and faith in Him brings eternal salvation to the spirit of the individual. But faith in God has wrought individual salvation since Eden, and none of the Old Testament saints are biblically known as Christians. What are we to make of it all? Please think with me!

The disciples of Jesus were first called Christians at Antioch (Acts 11). They did not call themselves that, but the general populace dubbed them with that title. Those were a Greek speaking people and knew exactly what they were meaning by the term. It is dedicated discipleship (followership) by which those saved people were recognized and entitled.

The disciples at Antioch were 1) saved by grace through faith; 2) baptized by the first church by immersion in water; 3) honored the Word of God by teaching the biblical landmarks that guided their life. These included the above requisites plus eternal security of the believer, the authority of the church to spread the gospel and administer the ordinances Jesus put into it. As one is dedicated to these things and grows in the Word, he will be a New Testament Christian. Did this just decimate the popular idea of Christianity? Doubtless!

When folks align themselves with a religious organization without thought or research of the Biblical model, they become a Christian in colloquial name only, and are devoid of any meaningful honesty with their Creator as it is revealed in His eternal Word. Such gives rise to evangelism being reduced to an invitation to “our church” and its programs rather than to the all-important, individual relationship with God, both in salvation, and in dedicated, acceptable service.

Maybe, just maybe, that Muslim pleasing president was unwittingly right. Simply put, a nation of churchgoers does not a Christian make!

FOR THOUGHT: Since salvation by grace is as old as Eden, does it not follow that today a person may be spiritually saved, but not known as a Christian by persistent inactivity in the teachings of Christ? Amplify this thought!

What do you think the general populace of Antioch were thinking when they called the disciples of Jesus “Christian?” Did their dedicated activity have anything to do with it?

How is it possible today to be considered a Christian, but remain inactive in the things of Christ? Might one be very active in a church, but apart from personal relationship with Christ? How does that fit with the appellation “Christian?”

THE COMPOUNDED EYE

As a small child in the community of Jenny Lind, Arkansas, a particular delight infrequently occurred by having a nickel to spend at one of three local stores. Clark and Bailey General Store sat on the west side of the highway traversing the community, and Presto Skinner's store, later Griffin's, sat on the east side directly across from Clark's. South about a block was Marion Matthews' General Store. They were small buildings as most country stores were in the 1940s, but each of them had a large, glass, candy counter displaying all manner of delectable delights. Spending the nickel was not going to be easy because it demanded a decision to select one above all the others that must be left behind. With nose flattened against the glass, the chore began. Imaginary tasting of each potential selection took a while, much to the impatience of the proprietor. Finally, a choice was made, a purchase completed, and a happy kid walked out of the store with his sweet prize tickling taste buds on the walk home. What does this have to do with anything? Think with me!

Good decision making requires correct, studied information, and good judgment to achieve a single eye. The prophet Elijah saw so many of his countrymen caught in the trap of the compounded eye. I Kings 18. His challenge to them was, *"How long halt ye between two opinions?"* They could not serve God and Baal. Their eye of life was compounded, and as Jesus taught, they were full of darkness. Matt. 6:22-23. That continues today as the religious offerings have increased exponentially together with a thousand other things vying for time and attention, offering promises that may or may not be true.

Your life is your nickel, and the world is filled with a myriad of offerings, brightly colored and touting themselves to be worthy of your interest and your years. It is the fool who spends it frivolously, but spend it each one will, while often the compounded eye remains, or is narrowed in focus wrongly. So long as one's eye is compounded, full potential will never be achieved, and those whose eye is single, but focused on the wrong things, will suffer eternal loss. Life is your nickel. Be very careful how you spend it; what you focus on as truly important. Narrowing the compounded eye to single vision with eternal hope can only be accomplished as Jesus, His person, words, and works are the focus!

FOR THOUGHT: How important is it to you that the focus of life-purpose be single?
Do you have acquaintances whose inability to make hard decisions interfered with success?
In an age when most everyone has to be quite good at many things, how may one stay focused on spiritual matters as most important?
What do people who have achieved mastery in arts or science have in common?

THE CONCEPT OF A CROWN

"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 Timothy 4:8.

The term "Crown" is an interesting word. In the New Testament it comes from the ancient Greek term, "Stephanos." That term means "that which surrounds." Now, you know what the name "Stephen" means.

It is amazing how many people still think of a crown as only a sort of headdress, a special cap or beanie adorning the head. Of course, there are some instances where that applies, as in the crown of a king, the crown of thorns Jesus wore, etc., but those things are merely emblematic, representative of a much larger reality. So, in keeping with the basic meaning of the term, one should look beyond the emblem to the reality it represents.

A quick survey of the Bible will yield many instances in support of this point. The crown of Joseph was the honor and glory of receiving a double portion of inheritance in Israel by his sons, each heading a tribe. Genesis 49:26. A virtuous woman is a crown to her husband. Prov. 12:4. Grandchildren are the crown of old men. Prov. 17:6. The hoary head is a crown of glory. Prov. 16:31. In the New Testament, the Philippians were Paul's crown of joy. Paul declared that a crown of righteousness was laid up for him. 2 Tim.4:8. Other New Testament books refer to a crown of glory, a crown of life, a crown of righteousness.

Each of the crowns here mentioned, as well as others, too, are gifts and attributes of conscious life. They connote the atmosphere and consciousness that dominate awareness. Truly, this merits much study, deep meditation, and unreserved dedication to the walk of life that will result in such final reality. There are crowns (surroundings of life) in the here and now, and there are crowns (surroundings of consciousness and awareness) in the hereafter. The latter will never end. Surely, any thinking person would want as many of these things as possible to be predominant around him in his eternal state.

It then becomes important to know that no offspring of Adam merits such. These are only possible in Christ. Please, please discard the erroneous idea that the new birth experience is all that is necessary to please the Lord and receive such crowns. These things are the eternal reward of life, well lived to the honor of God. In Christ (knowledge of and proper activity in the things of Christ Jesus), they will be both real and everlasting. Because the crowns we shall have hereafter are the crowns we weave around us today, we should all remain serious, perpetual students in the University of Christ Jesus, that we may indeed "know" Him and serve Him acceptably. Personally, I want all the crowns I can have to symbolically cast at the feet of the Savior!

FOR THOUGHT: What is the joyful meaning of your life that you consider a crown?

Are you working to achieve mastery in spiritual matters, especially in relationship with God and man, so that your life becomes full of good reflections?

What crowns do you want to have in your life? Name some of them.

THE COVENANT OR THE BOTTLE?

To avoid hypocrisy, one horn of a dilemma should drop! I refer to what is called “The Church Covenant”, framed and hanging on most Missionary Baptist Church House walls, contrasted with the elevation to which alcohol now stands in far too many churchmen. Now, do you want to think with me for a moment?

A hypocrite is one who professes one thing and consistently belies it with an opposite. The hypocrisy under consideration is the honored document labeled “Church Covenant” which plainly states that members of this church agree to abstain from alcohol as a beverage. The problem is, alcohol may be found in many church members’ homes, where it is consumed as a beverage. The contradiction is clear and simple.

This article is not a decry of the existence of alcohol. God made it just like He made everything else. But there is a purpose in everything. The purpose of alcohol is medicinal, not recreational. The very definition of sin is “missing the mark” or the misuse of purpose.

Of course, the alcohol beverage argument is quite old. Nationally, it was settled in the days of prohibition, but churches have long decried its dastardly wreckage and death of lives so dear. Hardly a family nowadays escapes the sorrow it brings both to individuals and families. And, while the sad loss continues, it is not foreseen that this drug will soon be eliminated from the culture, or from the sanctity of church folks who much prefer to look the other way than risk the loss of favor of members, and the benefit they may be financially and numerically to the organization.

As counties in Arkansas fall to the “wet” vote one by one, they do so by the passive no-vote as well as the active yes-vote of Baptists who exist in sufficient number to vote it down, but whose practical actions, or lack thereof, install it. It is not an admirable record, and its contribution to the destruction of so many lives will weigh heavily on those who give it their consent. (Humm, am I my brother’s keeper?)

But, back to the original theme of the article. Silence in conversation, homily, or lesson is not absolution to those who understand the issue. Churches that display the “Church Covenant” should be prompted to make a decision. If they profess to believe what it says, but refuse to teach its principles, it may be time for hard decision making. Shall the “Church Covenant” be taken down and relegated to the trash can or is it time for church folks to live up to what they profess to believe by their lifestyle? Decisions mark the way forward. Which path is the best choice? Elijah once asked, *“How long halt ye between two opinions?”*

FOR THOUGHT: Does the common “Church Covenant” carry the same authority as the Bible? What is the problem in churches that display the covenant, but fail to preach its concepts? Do you agree that many of the problems in today’s society in general, and churches in particular, exist because of the unwillingness of church folk to take a stand against such? It is said, “You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar” as an excuse for looking the other way at common sins. How does this play out with Bible teachings?

THE CRIB FILLED OR CLEAN?

"Where no oxen are, the crib is clean: but much increase is by the strength of the ox."

Proverbs 14:4.

The term "crib" may be variously understood as a stall, a granary, a manger or more, generally, a barn. Using the more general understanding "barn", it may be noted that three things relating to the ox are there: 1) a stall into which animals were brought for feeding; 2) a manger from which the animals would eat; 3) a separate room for the storage of grain.

Practically speaking, if there were no oxen on ancient farms, there would be no need for food in the manger. It would be clean. Moreover, no crops would have been planted and harvested; hence, the granary room would be clean. Additionally, in the absence of oxen, the floor of the stall would be clean. But increase was desired. The granary must be filled. But if it were not clean, neither would the other two parts of the barn be clean.

So, material increase meant the presence and use of the oxen; investment in food for the oxen; shovel power applied to the stall, and hard work invested in harvest.

Are you getting the idea? In today's society, and in churches as well, people want the end product, but they do not want to deal with the details of getting it. However, every increase has its price. Some want to play musical instruments, but not practice. Others want to be the CEO of a corporation, but do not want to spend years in education or apprenticeship. Some want to be an accomplished pastor, preacher, teacher, but do not want to spend years in prayerful study of the Word or experience the exercise of initial stumbling. Sadly enough, a lot of churches want to have a large membership, but do not want to invest time, prayer, and teaching to build a solid congregation. Later, they wonder in amazement when trouble comes, and it falls apart.

Truly, ours is a short-cut society filled with shortcut churches. But there is no shortcut to that which is truly an increase. The Great Commission is God's plan. It works, when worked. Short-cut it or abandon it, and the spiritual crib of God's House will be clean (empty), but much increase is by reason of Christian workers working God's plan.

FOR THOUGHT: Have you ever been a part of a group whose mindset seemed to be, "Let somebody else do it?" Was that your mindset, too?

What are the problems associated with increase without personal investment?

What parallels do you draw from Proverbs 14:4?

THE CRUX OF CLOSED COMMUNION

“For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come. Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause, many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep.” I Corinthians 11:26-30.

True Baptists believe in Closed Communion as opposed to Open Communion or even Close Communion. Most teachers emphasize the local nature of the church, and/or its disciplinary authority, both of which are good, but seem to zip over the head of so many in the pew. Let's take another look.

There is a warning about observing communion, or as Baptists like to say, “The Lord's Supper.” The warning is to not partake of it unworthily. Those so doing shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord, according to I Corinthians 11:27.

Let the reader be reminded of the difference between an adjective and an adverb. “Unworthy” is an adjective, describing the participant. “Unworthily” is an adverb describing the action of the verbs “shall eat and shall drink.” No one could consider himself worthy, but everyone participating in the Supper must do it worthily.

So, what constitutes “worthily?” Since the information regarding the observance of the Supper is always given in church context, “worthily” is predicated upon participants being born from above and having received scriptural New Testament baptism. Moreover, they must be a member in good standing of the church observing the Supper, but that is not all.

The emphasis in I Corinthians 11:28 is that one is to examine himself, especially in light of these requirements, and others similar to Jesus' teaching in His Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5:24.

The specific warning of observing the Supper unworthily is “damnation” (condemnation) to oneself, explained as “not discerning the Lord's body.” Such had already brought sickness and death among the Corinthians.

Finally, what is meant by the important phrase, “not discerning the Lord's body?” Well, think a minute!

No one living has seen the physical body of Jesus. So-called portraits of Him are just that. But the Lord has a body that is often referenced in the scriptures. It is the body of which He is the head, His Living, New Testament Church, which is always a local expression!

FOR THOUGHT: Why do you think the doctrine of closed communion is often misunderstood? Do you think ministers or churches have the liberty of God to ignore biblical context on anything?

If communion or the Lord's Supper is set in church context, what is wrong with individual or family communion such as in hospitals, etc.

Do you think it is better to abstain from communion rather than take it unworthily? Why?

THE EYE, THE LIGHT, AND THE LIFE

Everybody knows at least one of them! I refer to the proverbial “Jack of all trades.” However, as the old saying continues “... master of none!” In various career fields, it is vastly important that the pursuer focus singularly on the details of that discipline. This is no less true in acceptable discipleship of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Bible students will be reminded that Jesus said, *“The light of the body is the eye: when thine eye is single, thy whole body is full of light; but when thine eye is evil, thy body also is full of darkness.”* Luke 11:34. Thus in proportion to the degree of focus (the eye) will the seeker find light (understanding), and the reverse is also true in the measure of darkness (ignorance).

It was a darkened (ignorant) world into which Jesus came. He forthrightly declared that to be the point of condemnation. *“And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.”* John 3:19. John went on to record, *“In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.”* John 1:4-5.

His resident life is the light of men! How marvelous! Those who do not know Him in faith do not have this all-important light; hence, they walk on in darkness, not knowing where they are going. Every Christian ought to bow in thanksgiving to God for the light of life infused by the Holy Spirit through the eternal Word. It is always bright. It consistently lights up one’s pathway and allows the avoidance of so many pitfalls that would bring destruction. The beloved apostle went on to write in I John 1:5-7, *“This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.”* The eye, the light, and the life, what an immeasurably marvelous correlation. Come, let us walk together in His glorious light!

FOR THOUGHT: What makes you recoil in conversation with a “Jack of all trades?”
May one be smart indeed in earthly things, but ignorant in spiritual matters?
What happens when unspiritual, but smart people make decisions about the Bible?
Have you experienced a personal awakening to some spiritual points about which you were wrong?

THE FAITH ONCE DELIVERED TO THE SAINTS!

Our dear brother, Jude, wrote in his epistle, *“Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.”* V. 3.

Here, the writer targets two subject matters, the latter of which receives by far the greater attention. Those two subjects are the common salvation, and how to deal with, overtly and responsively, the faith once delivered unto the saints.

The common salvation references the salvation of the spirit of man. It is called common because it is unrestricted and had been occurring since the Garden of Eden. In it all of God’s people rejoice as it is spiritual life, foundational to any advancement in knowledge and maturity in the kingdom work of God. However, it is just exactly that. It is not the destination, but the first step of a journey.

There is a system of faith called the faith; a system of doctrines which was once (for all time) delivered unto the saints. Through the centuries of the age, devoted men in the churches of the Living God have set their hand to encapsulate that faith in documents called confessions. While there may be variance in those of a valid standing, the core doctrines of the New Testament from which there can be no turning away is always there. These are namely: 1) the inherent depravity of the total man, or all without exception are sinners. 2) Salvation is by grace through faith plus nothing else. 3) The eternal security of the believer, or in the vernacular, once saved, always saved, will be there. 4) Baptism of a professed believer is immersion in water by the authority of a New Testament church. 5) Baptism and communion or the Lord’s Supper are church ordinances of each and every local body. While many more are often mentioned, and they are important, these core doctrines are the hallmark of New Testament churches and have been for the past two thousand years.

Jude emphatically states that we should be contenders for this historical system labeled the faith. To contend does not necessarily mean contentious, but that churches should not be removed from it. They should be known by the same, which is sometimes referred to as “landmarks of faith.” Moreover, contending for them should be done “earnestly.” This adverb qualifies the phrase “should contend” as being diligent, sincere, steadfast, doing better than the average. To this end the Spirit of God abides in the church and it empowers the mature members to meet the onslaught of evil people dressed as sheep; illustrated by the rioters who came out of Egypt and the angels that kept not their first estate. It really matters, big time, what one truly believes.

FOR THOUGHT: Are you able to verbalize the difference between “faith,” and “the faith?” Name four or five core doctrines that have always identified New Testament churches. What does “once delivered to the saints” mean to you? Do you see any room for taking liberties with “the faith” to render alternative meanings?

THE GREAT ESSENTIAL EQUALIZER

To think in terms of equalizing is an admission or foregone conclusion that all things are not equal. Some things do stand in such need. For instance, mechanisms of defense are often thought of as equalizers. An older, weakened individual may not stand a chance against the strength of youth with a knife in his hand, but the weaker one may say he has an equalizer, pointing to a loaded pistol. Still others see the grave as the great equalizer. Whether one is rich or poor, highly educated, or ignorant, the grave awaits all, thus it is the great equalizer. These are very limited viewpoints of what is equal. Please entertain your mind on this subject with me.

While studying for a sermon some time ago, I saw something in familiar passages of scripture that I had overlooked before, and it speaks to the potential of the equality of men by which they are acceptable to God. It was right there all the time in James 2:21-25. James used two Old Testament examples as he argued the point of necessity of faith and works combining to reflect God's work in men.

The first example used was Abraham, and his offering of Isaac. "*Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?*" Verse 22. The enormity of Abraham's faith earned for him the imputation of God's righteousness and the title, "the friend of God." The second example is that of Rahab, the harlot. Her work in receiving, concealing and directing the Hebrew spies safely out of Jericho were actions of faith, and by the implementation of that faith, she and her family were saved from death, and she became a link in the lineage of Christ Jesus.

But what a contrast! Others could have been mentioned, but these were the chosen ones. There is little comparison between Abraham and Rahab, but there is significant contrast! Yet, there is an equalizer. It is called faith, and its accompanying works. This speaks to all of God's children throughout the ages that the extremities in men must be equalized in the person, words, and works of Christ to be acceptable to God, and rewarded appropriately. Has your spirit been saved by repentance and faith in Christ? Then are you allowing that faith to have expression through baptism, church membership, prayer, Bible study, etc., constraining your life to the glory of God? God wills that your life be equalized in Him through the medium of the faith once delivered to the saints.

FOR THOUGHT: In what way may it be rightfully said that all men are created equal? What then is the great equalizer that must be applied to all men to be accepted by God? How is that equalizer applied to the individual? Is it applied to you?

THE I CAN SYNDROME

"I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." Phil. 4:13.

A syndrome is defined as a set of symptoms or a condition characterized by a set of symptoms working together by which it is identified, as the "not in my backyard" syndrome.

In today's world, it is easy to find a negative syndrome dominating the lives of God's people. It is the sense of overload, of burden that limits or negates altogether their pressing forward in the things that count in life, that which is of God and beneficial to self and to others. What I mean is this: when asked how one is doing or when asking for someone to actually do something, one is likely to hear, "I am doing all right under the circumstances," or "I would love to, but cannot under the circumstances."

Now why is it that most folks are always "under the circumstances?" Is this just an excuse, or do people really feel loaded down, depressed, unable to do what they should with any degree of joy? Doubtless, this is a condition that actually exists in the lives of some folks at times, but then they become comfortable in it, and it becomes a syndrome by which they are recognized.

The good news is that there is another, completely different syndrome that can characterize life. It is the "I can" syndrome. Folks in leadership capacity often look for someone to take responsibility for a task. They find, without exception, that if they really want to get something done, they should call on someone who is really busy. In him/her, they will find one who has learned to manage time and abilities; one who is characterized by the "I can" syndrome. Such persons live in the joy of accomplishment, on TOP of the circumstances instead of under them.

This is the syndrome that characterized the apostle, Paul. He, more than others, could have set forth reasons why he had enough burdens, and too many heartaches, but his was the joy of involvement, of accomplishment. He is a great example of what we all can be in Christ. We should all be busy doing what we can do for the cause of Christ, not under, but on top of, the circumstances. That is not dependence in self, but in Christ!

FOR THOUGHT: Do you know anyone who is most always under the circumstances? Think of someone you can identify as most always on top of the circumstances. What do you think makes the difference in these two types of people?

THE IMPORTANCE OF DETAILS

Educators know that higher intelligence surfaces in the recognition of details. While it is important to see the forest, it is of greater importance to see the trees that constitute it. When looking at a kindergarten stick drawing of a boy or girl, they are impressed if the hands contain five fingers because most kindergarten students might draw only two or three.

Indeed, details are important, and the lack of knowledge of them can be quite embarrassing at times. Here is a case in point.

Recently, President Obama of the United States attempted to justify his release and/or swaps of prisoners by referencing three former Presidents of the U.S. that did the same thing on their watch at the end of wars, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt. One might find it interesting to note that none of these Presidents were in office at the end of the wars of their time.

George Washington was not elected until six years after the end of the Revolutionary War. Abraham Lincoln was assassinated before the Civil War ended, and Franklin Roosevelt died before the end of WWII. In another interview, he said that George Washington drank beer in the White House when he was President. In fact, he never lived in the White House since it had not been built. Perhaps his Ivy League college is proud of him, but one would think his staff would clue him in on important points of American history which he obviously did not get in the schools of the Far East.

Similarly, Christians often display an obvious lack of detailed knowledge of God's Word when conversing with others. How embarrassing is it to hear someone say that Elijah was thrown into the lion's den instead of Daniel, or that the seed on stony ground failed after it rained forty days and nights, or that the rainbow is a sign of the resurrection. Doubtless, such bloopers are extreme, but there are so many others that are not, but just as wrong.

The Bible teaches us that we are ambassadors for Christ...not that we should be... but that we are! *"Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God."* 2 Corinthians 5:20. Let us all then work to be good ambassadors with a basic knowledge bank of the scriptures and an understanding of what that knowledge means.

FOR THOUGHT: A child's overlooking details is acceptable, but what about someone in the nation's highest office overlooking the important details of history?
How tragic would it be if the spiritual details of the Bible are overlooked or ignored?
Do you think men have the liberty to alter details of the Bible? Why?

THE IMPORTANCE OF KNOWLEDGE

"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge: because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee, that thou shalt be no priest to me: seeing thou has forgotten the law of thy God, I will also forget thy children." Hosea 4:6.

The message of God through the prophet Hosea to the ten tribes that made up the Northern Kingdom of Israel should have brought piercing alarm to them, but as is most often the case, they were so steeped in iniquity and selfishness, that it did not give them pause.

Accordingly, God sent judgment upon them in the form of the Assyrians who conquered them, inhabited their cities, dispersed some, and intermingled through marriage the others so that their identity became lost to the world to this day. Could we fast forward to today, and apply this message to the covenant people of God, the New Testament church? Think with me!

The New Testament church is the covenant embodiment of grace in men. It is what the New Testament is all about. However, modern times have brought the toughest temptations of the ages, that of abundant materialism, and the willingness of men to enslave themselves and their families in order to have its offerings. Couple that with a social religion whose tenets are foreign to the New Testament, and a false sense of security, spiritual lethargy, and slumber takes over. Knowledge is forgotten, if it was ever discovered, through the common, "I am O.K.; you are O.K." mindset. The present, degenerated condition of what used to be called the backslidden state, leaves the majority of church members grossly ignorant of the tenets of the faith, once delivered to the saints; and its grand legacy often counted as worthless as a result. In light of the plentiful copies of the plenary Word of God, collecting dust on the shelves of Christian homes, is it reasonable to expect a lesser or a harsher judgment than Hosea announced to Israel?

The actions of God's people today are not without consequence, even as those of Israel were not. Forget God, and He will forget you, insofar as any covenant blessing is concerned, and those are many and extremely rich! Then, what about the children, and the grandchildren? Some would hasten to say that a God of love would not do that. Well, He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. It has happened before, and it will happen again. God reacts to man as man reacts to God! How are you treating Him? What do you know of Him and His Word? Much that is so dear to you hangs in the balance . . . forever!

FOR THOUGHT: Do you believe modern Christians are more knowledgeable than those of generations gone by? Why?

If the ten tribes of Israel were destroyed for lack of knowledge, what amount of knowledge does the average churchgoer have today to prevent a similar fate?

Does God visit the sins of fathers on children of the third and fourth generations?

Is America blessed or cursed today by the actions of early colonists?

THE NATURAL BRANCHES TEACH A VALUABLE LESSON

The reinstitution and revival of the Jewish nation since 1948 fills the evangelical world with excitement, leading them to proclaim that God is mightily blessing Israel. There may be another viewpoint worth considering. Think with me for a moment.

The work of God with man involves a system of faith covenants which began in Abraham. It was passed on to Isaac, and Jacob, then an additional covenant was created for the Hebrew people on Mt. Sinai, a covenant of law that was destined to be fulfilled by the second Adam, who also ushered in the covenant of grace.

Officially, the people of the law covenant rejected Jesus with dire consequences. Jesus said in finality, *"Behold your house is left unto you desolate. . . Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord."* Matt. 23:38-39. Desolate! What a sense of isolation and abandonment that term portrays.

Reminiscing, my first trip to the Holy Land was filled with so much wonder, as well as many misgivings. While in Jericho, a couple of young ladies (schoolteachers) asked if there was room could they ride back to Jerusalem with us. They did. Engaging them in conversation, I stated, "I guess you will be going to the synagogue tomorrow." (It was a Friday afternoon). "WHAT?!" they replied in amazement. "No one does that anymore!" So, I subsequently learned how godless the people really were, and was shocked to learn that Tel Aviv is at least arguably the homosexual capital of the world.

Furthermore, the Yad Vashem Holocaust museum brings tears to the eyes, but there is a world of hurt still coming that will pale that horrible event. The problem: the natural branches are severed, but stop, think, learn!

The Lord's churches have been largely rocked to sleep in the opulence of materialism to the point that it appears to exist to please itself. Nothing must be done to rock their comfort zone, and false sense of spiritual superiority. Surely, it is past time that attention be returned to the book! The natural branches (the nation of Israel) have been severed, and the true Israel of God (the New Covenant Church) grafted in. So, is it time to revel in that grafted-in position? What does the scripture say? *"For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee."* Rom. 11:21.

Truly, the severed, natural branches still teach a valuable lesson to those who are able to discern it. Let the people of God dust off the Bible, return to reading and studying the Word. What has happened to Israel is not beyond the possibility, even the probability, of happening to a church immersed in the world of formal, but powerless, religious agendas.

FOR THOUGHT: What do the natural branches being severed (Rom. 11) mean to you?

Do you think God is working with national Israel in spiritual terms today? Why?

Do you see signs of modern churches becoming as Israel was in Jesus' day?

What do you think Jesus' pronouncement of "desolate" to Israel means?

THE ONE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THREE FOR ME

In Romans 10:1-8 there are three distinct forms of righteousness mentioned. One is the righteousness of law; another is the righteousness of man; the third is the righteousness of the faith in and of Christ Jesus. Think about it!

“Righteousness” simply means rightwiseness; the state of being right. However, that which is right must be what is right in the sight of our Holy, Creator God. Israel had a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. Therefore, in their ignorance of true rightwiseness that is altogether acceptable to God, they engaged in the pursuit of their own rightwiseness; a rightwiseness that they themselves must build. Such is iniquity, and never acceptable to God. The rightwiseness of the law underscored the sinfulness of all men, and it led with unerring consistency to the rightwiseness of Christ Jesus, which lives in faith.

Accordingly, the rightwiseness of Christ Jesus is the rightwiseness of faith. *“Now faith is the substantiating of things hoped for; the evidence of things unseen,”* Heb. 11:1. It is no wonder then, that this faith is presented in hard evidence; identifiable and provable in terms of the Holy Bible. That is why it is presented as “the faith” in Romans 10:8, which is understood as the system of doctrines or teaching commonly called *“The faith once delivered to the saints.”* Jude 1:3. Thus did Paul say in the latter part of Rom. 10:8, *“...this is the declaration of the faith [system of doctrines] which we are proclaiming.”* [Lit. translation].

That the burden of the chapter deals with the salvation of the mind-life of the born-again ones is evident, for he goes on to say, *“If you should be avowing in your mouth the Lordship of Jesus, and you should be believing in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you shall be being saved.”* [Lit. translation].

The doctrine of immediate, spiritual salvation upon repentance from sin and receiving Christ Jesus as Savior is a most precious and cornerstone doctrine. However, the rightwise life God would have all His people to know and to live must go beyond the spiritual salvation experience to embrace the teachings of Holy Writ, Heb. 6:1-3. That is the faith of Christ Jesus, and it is precisely that which may produce salvation of the soul or mind-life of those who have been born from above. The rightwiseness of man, and the rightwiseness of the law are not to be desired, but the rightwiseness by the faith of Christ Jesus is to be highly prized.

FOR THOUGHT: Name the three forms of righteousness Paul mentions in Romans 10:1-8.

What is meant by the terms “the faith?”

What is a good, Bible definition of faith?

Does salvation of the spirit of man and salvation of the mind-life make sense to you?

Do you think lost people still engage in good, moral works in hopes of obtaining favor with God?

THE PLACE OF LAW AND GRACE

Oil and water do not mix. But they would mix before law and grace would do so. A question was posed about Exodus 23:3, 6, “*Neither shalt thou countenance a poor man in his cause,*” and “*Thou shalt not wrest the judgment of thy poor in his cause.*” Does this mean that poor people should be exempt from any law based on their socio-economic status?

It is my studied belief that Israel is here commanded to be “straight shooters” under the terms of the Mosaic Law. That is, the poor man was not to be excused simply because he was poor, and the judgment against him was definitely not to be skewed in his disfavor. Now consider the contextual meaning as well.

These verses are the initiation of Law to Israel, the covenant people of God. It was vitally important that they learn (and we, as well, from them) the difference between sin and righteousness, and just how completely righteous God is, and how completely sinful man is. This law then became our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, and His grace, Paul argues in Galatians 3:24-25.

However, the law and the prophets were, until John (the Baptist) Luke 16:16. Jesus said they must be fulfilled, Luke 24:44, and He did so according to Matthew 5:18; Col. 2:14-17. The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came to us by Christ Jesus, John 1:17. Grace does not mean that the law was not righteous, quite the contrary. Covenants may change, but principles do not.

Law is law! It is commandment plus penalty. If either is absent, law is not in play. It cannot be injected with anything else and still be law. But it is recognized that some cases tried by the medium of courts of law may either merit or demand mercy. But, when mercy is injected, it negates law and creates grace. Grace is what Jesus is all about. He as the Godman met each and every demand of Law. He fulfilled it to the very jot and tittle and offers to us, not the punishment of law which we deserve, (and by which God’s standard will always remain) but His own righteousness by grace through faith.

Moreover, just as law cannot be injected with anything else and remain law, so it is with grace. It is ludicrous to seek to maintain grace through law. This is the trouble the churches of Galatia got into, and which Paul addressed in his epistle by their name. After all, the law was not given for righteous people, but for sinners. By it they could understand their lost condition and their inability to do anything about it except through an extraordinary act of grace.

That mercy and grace should rule whenever possible among the affairs of men is underscored repeatedly in Jesus’ teachings, and especially in Matthew 18:21-30.

FOR THOUGHT: Why do you think law and grace do not mix?

What was the purpose of Old Testament Law?

What was the danger of men rendering judgment in olden times? In modern times? Do you think rich people may have an advantage at court over poor people?

THE POWER OF LIVING VICARIOUSLY

Curiosity may have killed the cat, but there would be little human progress without it. Curious minds are inquiring minds, and inquiring minds want to know. Accordingly, the shelves of bookstores and libraries across the nation abound with fiction and non-fiction, biographies, and references, books of most every sort. The pages are filled with well-arranged words, crafted to plot, explain, and record events that allow the reader to fit into the designed role of the protagonist, or the context of an historical event, or envision the process of construction or repair.

So, to identify as someone else for an adventure, exercising the senses of life in pre-arranged context is known as living vicariously. It is the power of books, videos, and good story tellers. Most folks really do enjoy living vicariously and will go to great lengths to do it for a little time. One will not interact long with friends before hearing of a really good book or exciting movie. I once knew a lady who loved to live vicariously so much that she had rooms of bookshelves crammed full of novels she had read. But aside from practical instructional manuals and historical records, those experiences last about as long as it takes to read the book or view the movie. It is human entertainment.

But there is another library of sixty-six books of important, non-fictional events ranging from creation, to murder, love, sensual promiscuity, global disaster, adventure, war, enslavement, salvation, covenants of God and man, grace, faith, hope for every person, and accurate information about exactly how the human future will come into eternal fixation. Unlike other types of books, this one contains no errors, no contradictions, and its words are accompanied with phenomenal power of the unseen world. In the words of the Creator, “. . . *the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit and they are life.*” John 6:63.

What was it like when God spoke the unseen into present creation, when he decided to destroy the world with a flood? What was it like when Abraham followed God into a strange land, when Jacob worked so many years for his wives, when he wrestled with an angel, when the Hebrews made their exodus from Egypt, when Daniel spent his life in Babylonian captivity, when the shepherds first heard the angelic announcement that God's Son had been given to us? What was it like to stand on Golgotha and know that what you were seeing was done for you?

The library to which I refer is in your grasp; it is in your home. How much time you have spent living vicariously in it shows, because unlike others, it transforms the reader by renewing the mind.

FOR THOUGHT: Have you discovered the mentioned, wide range of subject matter in the Bible? What do you think about it? Why do you think these things are in the Bible?

What does Jesus mean when he spoke the words in John 6:63?

Since the Bible is God's instructional manual for human life, and since you own a copy of it, what excuse may be offered for being ignorant of it?

THE SOUGHT, THE BOUGHT, AND THE TAUGHT

“How then can man be justified with God? or how can he be clean that is born of a woman?” Job 25:4.

These three things summarize all the goodness afforded sinful mankind, the love, the blood and the Word. Think with me about this.

It is unceasingly amazing that the Great, Holy, Almighty God, who made all things, and sustains the universe in His power, should love such depraved, sinful, creatures as human beings. But thank God, He does. He loves us with a love so profound and intense that it is not comprehensible to our finite mind. Perhaps the greatest expression of that love is penned in the immortal words of John 3:16, *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”* It was purely the love of God that sought us in our altogether sinful state. There is more.

But seeking alone is ineffective. There was a price to pay for the never-dying souls of men—a price that no offspring of Adam could possibly pay. Yet, it must be paid by man. It was man who admitted sin into the human race; therefore, it must be by man that sin is overcome, and eternal life put in its place, I Cor. 15:21. To this end the Great Creator became a man, born of a virgin—sinless and holy to fulfill the law, and paid the awful price for sin on the cruel cross. Make no mistake about it, it was the holy blood of Jesus, the Son of God, that paid the price for our condemned souls. “What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. Oh, precious is the flow that makes me white as snow. No other fount I know, nothing but the blood of Jesus.” Consider also that it doesn’t stop here.

Additionally, we are saved to serve, *“We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works which God before ordained that we should walk in them.”* Eph. 2:10. Human lives could never be justified by the deeds of the law. However, by receiving and living in the “faith once delivered to the saints,” the life of one may be justified before God, even as Abraham our father was justified by his expression of faith, argues James in his book. So, what should we believe? How shall we live? What shall we teach? What is our hope? All of these questions and many, many more are satisfied by the plenary, infallible, written word of God. These are instructions that must not be ignored but learned and employed.

As the holiday season brings forth increased thoughts of God and our relationship with Him, we are humbled, even overwhelmed, by the abundant and consistent blessings bestowed upon us. Making a list would consume much time. That thought is so wonderful! However, much is said when in studied thought, one gives thanks to God for the Love that sought us, the Blood that bought us, and the Word that taught us. Therein are we justified before God in our living because God sees us through the righteousness of His only begotten Son.

FOR THOUGHT: Does “justified” mean to be innocent or to be declared righteous?

What are the three important terms summarizing goodness in this article?

Think about how these three things apply to you, or should be applied to you?

THE VALUE OF A WEDDING GARMENT

It is marked, common propensity in men to err. If a passage of scripture is not easily understood, it may be passed over as relatively unimportant. It will not be studied by the majority, nor will it be seriously entertained widely as explained by others. Like children who refuse nourishment and growth in favor of their status quo, folks tend to revert to a base, correct theology that is made to be incorrect through neglect of the next step. Think with me!

Matthew 22: 1-14 is as much scripture as John 3:16. It is holy, and it has a definite meaning that is important to understand. It is the story of a marriage feast prepared by a certain king for his son. Servants were sent out with invitations, but excuses were made by most all. Moreover, the servants were treated spitefully by those rejecting the invitation. Then the king sent other servants to invite whomever they found so that the feast was furnished with guests. It was then that the king saw one among the guests without a wedding garment. He was evicted. **Bottom line:** many are called but few are chosen. **Beginning line:** this is like the kingdom of heaven. **These two lines make the story clear as a bell.**

It is the kingdom under consideration. The kingdom of heaven is defined as the righteous work of God being carried on by righteous men. Jesus repeatedly warned the Jews that the kingdom was to be taken from them and given to another. And so, it came to pass as the old covenant was fulfilled to the jot and tittle on the cross, and the New Covenant was purchased with His blood. The house of the Jewish people was left unto them desolate.

Of course, many of the Jews still claim to be the covenant people of God as do a fairly large segment of apostate churches. But the time is coming when the marriage supper of the Lamb will occur, and some who think they have a place in it will be rejected. Again, this is not a salvation story, but a kingdom story. It teaches that there is much to be responsible for after initial salvation and church membership. Many are called to be a part of this wonderful kingdom, but few are chosen. What are the criteria for being chosen? It is simply a positive response to the call. Submissive discipleship bears tremendous reward. The wedding garment of obedience in righteous works (of God's approval) is of immense value!

FOR THOUGHT: May one be saved (born from above) and denied a place of rulership with Jesus in the next phase of the kingdom of heaven when He returns?
If the wedding garment represents acceptable, righteous works, what will happen if one is devoid of such, or if all he has done has been outside Bible sanction?
What do you think Matthew 22:1-14 means?

THE VALUE OF EDUCATION

From earliest times, opportunities and tremendous blessings from the Creator were abundant for those prepared to receive them. Recipients' key requisites most often were education and faith in His word and works. It remains that way! Think with me a moment.

Antediluvian world folks, far afield from the primitive imagination of modern man, show excellence in education. Adam must have been created with the equivalent of a PhD since he gave names to everything in creation, Gen. 2:19. Jabal excelled in animal husbandry. Jubal in music, especially in harp and organ. Tubalcain was a master artificer in brass and iron. Nimrod built a city. On and on it goes. Then God called upon Noah to build an ark to the saving of air-breathing life. It was approximately 450 by 45 by 30 in foot dimensions. Now just what dumb bunny was able to do that? Noah was a righteous man, but he was also an educated man, and prepared for the job.

Looking at other instances, Moses stands out as exemplary in educational readiness. He had the best Egypt could provide plus 40 years of personally examining the terrain of Sinai. David was a mighty warrior, but also a master of strategy, faith, and music. Notice also that Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) were especially selected by King Nebuchadnezzar, not because he knew them, but because they fit his criteria of service, to wit: *“ . . . no blemish, but well favored, and skillful in all wisdom, and cunning in knowledge, and understanding science, and such as had ability in them to stand in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the learning and the tongue of the Chaldeans.”* Daniel 1:4. They were ready in both spiritual and material education to seize upon opportunities to serve both God and man.

Finally, in the important initial evangelism of the first century world, God chose Saul of Tarsus, a Hebrew of Hebrews, more zealous in his faith than all his brethren, and who could not only evangelize with the New Testament doctrines after God got through teaching him, but who could, by his excellent education in the tradition of his fathers, persuade thousands of Jews and Gentiles alike to embrace New Testament faith. Men should excel in something, faith notwithstanding and underscored, and then use that excellence to help others, as God provides opportunities, which He most certainly will do.

Through brick-and-mortar institutions and online educational offerings, the present generation has more information and outreach ability than all the past generations had in all their collective forms. Still, the propensity to submit to the lure of inertia manages to hinder both individual and church progress. Perhaps we all would do well to hear God's still small voice to Elijah saying, “What are you doing here?”

FOR THOUGHT: Do you see a pattern of educational excellence in men God has used? Should education steer spiritual understanding in men or vice-versa? If you agree that to whom much is given, much is required, do you also agree that more is required of modern disciples because of the advanced opportunities of life?

THE VALUE OF “TODAY!”

O.K. You wanted it. You’ve got it! Just think! Jeremiah recorded in Lamentations 3:22-24, *“It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him.”* So, it is a new day. The first day of the rest of your life. A new crossroads, with you having the opportunity to make really right, lasting choices of goodness. It might be illustrated by the little guy who was so happy with his birthday party that he wished he could have a birthday every day. Well, you may!

No, I have not lost it! The vacation did not make me crazy, but have you ever said or heard someone say, “If only I had the chance to do it all over again?”

Well, today is the first day of the rest of your life, so, HAPPY BIRTHDAY!! The Bible reference to this present age of grace is called TODAY! One day, TODAY will close, and death will close it prematurely for millions. Today is precious! It is your day! So, today you begin anew, all over again! Whatever you wanted life to be for you within the will of God, let it begin today! In a manner of speaking, you really can do it all over again! But will things change? Will they be different, or will they be the same piling up of more regret?

Remember, God is leading, but He is not forcing! A commitment on your part is necessary to put Him first in regular church attendance, Bible reading, prayer, and in witnessing, while reaching out to help others. In other words, in the commitment of true perpetual worship comes the enabling power of God through the Holy Spirit to weave a fabric of life that is truly different. What then is needed on your part? It is an unreserved commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ, not only as your Savior, but as your Lord. Do it!!!!

FOR THOUGHT: Have you ever really wanted to start all over again?

Since Jesus bids “whosoever” to come to Him and drink freely of the water of life, do you believe this offer extends to you?

Do you think Satanic influence plays a part in people procrastinating in commitment to Christ?

Think of the things that are interfering with your commitment. Are they worth it? What will be their value in one hundred years? In eternity?

Do you have any reason to believe that you will definitely be alive here on earth tomorrow?

THE VERBALLY INSPIRED, PLENARY BIBLE

“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.” 2 Timothy 3:16.

Some Bibles have an initial dedicatory page. Others may have simple statements about the contents of the book, indicating it is the verbally inspired, plenary word of God. Just what does this mean? Think with me for a minute!

The Holy Bible is the Word of God to mankind. It illuminates us all about the common and condemning problem of sin, how to be saved, and more than ninety percent of it tells us how to live after the “born from above” spiritual experience. But how did it come to us? God chose to use human instrumentality to deliver His inerrant, eternal Word. To that end, He inspired some 40 writers living in different countries, different cultures, and different languages to write sixty-six books over a 1500-year period of time. All of this without contradiction!

“Verbal” means that writers were allowed to write in their own style and language. “Inspired” means the Holy Spirit superintended the writing so that each word was exactly the right word. “Plenary” simply means full or complete. Thus does the Bible embody the faith once (for all time) given to the saints, Jude 3.

Once the original writings (autographs) were completed, copies were diligently written by professional scribes for distribution and preservation. Many of those most ancient manuscripts remain with us to this day and are the basis of printed Bibles, particularly some thirty such manuscripts collectively known as the “Textus Receptus,” or “Received Text”, from which the King James and some other versions are translated.

Thus, the verbally inspired, plenary Bible is the perfect law of liberty, of which James wrote. James 1:25. It is that perfect thing, which was to come in Paul’s day, I Cor 13:10, which would replace the temporary grace gifts of the apostolic age. It is the standard and criteria by which the life of the saved will be made manifest at the Judgment Seat of Christ, and unrepentant sinners at the Great White Throne Judgment, as the books are opened. John 12:48.

Ironically, there is considerable squabbling in these last days as to which version of the Bible one should study. In the explosion of translations over the last 100 years, it is true that some are more true to the ancient manuscripts, but saddest of all is a statement overheard not long ago, “It really does not matter what version of the Bible one does NOT read!”

FOR THOUGHT: Some Bibles are translations, others are paraphrases. What is the difference?

Do you believe the “all scripture” of 2 Timothy 3:16 is the inspired Word of God?

What does “Textus Receptus” mean? What constitutes it?

THE WOE THAT SHOUTS, “WHOA!”

It has been said of some folks, “They are so heavenly minded that they are of little earthly good!” Truly, the dimension of divinely approved discipleship goes beyond rules. It is deeper, higher, broader than many suppose. However, it is just too easy to get caught up in a set of religious rules that invariably leads one down the path of legalism. It had happened to a lot of folks in Jesus’ day, and it still does. Indeed, there are many right things that modern disciples of God do, but a spiritual relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ cannot be acceptably reduced to a set of rules. It goes deeper, much deeper.

Some of the most scathing denunciations from the Master fell on the religious folks who had hewn out a traditional path to the exclusion of many, vitally important tenets of faith and actions. The Pharisees had managed to skirt responsibility for their aged parents, as taught under the law of Moses, by claiming all they had was “corbin,” (dedicated to God). Moreover, in full confrontation to the legal, self-righteous leaders of His day, Jesus said, *“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.”* Matt. 23:23. It was not so much a matter of their doing wrong, as it was failure to do what was right, to complete the practice of discipleship in a godly way.

The danger of this being a repetitious cycle is ever present. True Christianity certainly does have specific tenets of doctrine, but the complements of morals, compassion, love, and genuinely caring for others, make up a mode of life prompted by the Holy Spirit; one that comes from the very heart of spiritual people. It is deep, it is wide, it is high, it is often spontaneous and instant. It is evidence of the residence of that New Commandment Jesus gave, that we love one another, even as He loves us.

We do well to maintain a close one-on-one relationship with Jesus, which will enable us to walk in the Spirit, as well as the letter of His Word. Jesus pronounced woe on some legalistically religious folks. It was a woe that shouted “Whoa!” Perhaps we all should hear that more often!

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think there is a danger of spirituality being substituted by legalism? Should trusted spiritual leaders be accepted at face value or should their teaching be plainly supported by what the Bible says?

Do you agree that while true churches and ministers are important, the most important thing for every individual is an on-going, personal relationship with God, and the churches and ministers are for the support of such?

THE WORLD OF THEOLOGICAL MAYHEM

"Wherefore be ye not unwise but understanding what the will of the Lord is." Ephesians 5:17.

Theology is built in the human mind and heart one word at a time. It is imperative that each term be thoroughly understood and used in appropriate expression. Satan's trick to blind folks is not to change terminology, but to change the definition of them. The result is religious mayhem in what is supposed to represent Jesus and His teachings in Holy Writ. See then how this affects ecclesiology, or the understanding of "church."

"Church" is the ambiguous, English word used to translate the Greek word, "ecclesia." That term is a composite of "ek" (out) plus "kaleo," (to call); hence, a called-out assembly. It is not exclusively a Bible term but was used in early Greek to designate town councils, etc. when they were in session. It was always a local, visible assembly of specific purpose. Jesus used this term to designate his followers. It was understood by this definition for many centuries.

With the division of churches over the encroachment of ministerial hierarchies, growing doctrinal differences, and the acceptance of the Roman government by some to be the state religion, the allegiance to Jesus was escalated away, in favor of the state of Rome. This gave rise to what is known among them as the universal, visible church. They solidified that status with the installation of a "pope" around 606 A.D. So, a new understanding of "church" came into existence.

Next, the Protestant Reformation found the reformers and their followers in dire straits. They understood the need for church authority to administer the sacraments, and they recognized that they were without it. They could not bring themselves to return to the Roman pope, and they disdained the Anabaptists. So, they invented a way for themselves. It was here that the idea of the universal, **invisible** church was first conceived. It postulates that one is admitted to the universal, invisible church in the initial salvation experience, regardless of baptism or admission to a physical assembly. For nearly 500 years their scholars have written theological matters from this viewpoint, and it has impacted Baptists on a large scale. Hence, yet another heretical definition is placed on the word "church."

Opposing definitions of terms and opposing doctrinal beliefs have done much to wreak theological havoc in the modern world. But it underscores individual responsibility to understand from the Word, and to incorporate that into one's belief system. Soon, full accounting of these things must be given to the Master whose truth will forever remain unbending.

FOR THOUGHT: Research the origin of the English word "church." What does it mean? If the Greek term of the New Testament means a visible, assembly called out or together for a specific purpose, do men have the authorized liberty to change it to mean something else? Do you understand that Satanic influence in religious men would work tactfully to ultimately destroy what Jesus personally initiated in His ministry? Do you agree that men may be sincere, but at the same time, be sincerely wrong?

THINGS ARE NOT ALWAYS AS ONE MAY THINK!

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek." Romans 1:16.

A number of years ago, a church member who worked for a large company was given a trip for two to Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. His wife was deathly afraid of air travel and would not go under any circumstances. So, he gave the trip to his pastor and wife. We were thrilled to have this special five-day treat. Our names were added to the roster of other business owners and employees who were to make the trip. My name was simply listed as William Dillard. That created no small stir, of which I was totally unaware.

As Laura and I boarded the plane to begin the trip, we were aware of intense gazing from several others. One was heard to remark, "Is that really William Dillard, and if so, why is he wearing a belt buckle that says Jerusalem?" We caught on. They were expecting the owner of the Dillard Corporation whose name was William to be the boarding passenger, not a Baptist preacher.

After a few laughs, and some others regaining their composure to cover their embarrassment, we capitalized on the mistaken identity as a talking point. It provided a springboard into other interesting areas of life, and the uplifting of the Lord Jesus as well. The trip was most enjoyable. The hotel featured very nice rooms, unique swimming pools, and a huge open breezeway entry. The beaches were blackened sand from volcano activity long, long ago. The food, entertainment and relaxation were marvelous. In the end, the fairly large group was happy to have a Baptist preacher and his wife and told us so. We carried a couple of hundred New Testaments with us and were delighted in presenting them to business owners in the tourist city. Many of them were happy to receive them and complimented us, stating no one who had ever visited their store had given such a nice gift. We hope many of them trusted the Lord as a result.

Truly, things are not always as they may appear to be and that can be very disappointing. Solomon said, *"There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death."* Proverbs 14:12. But one is never disappointed in the Lord Jesus Christ and the tremendous blessings of life that come from His hand.

FOR THOUGHT: If salvation is in Christ alone, why do so many try to add works to it? Do you think mistaken identities on earth may indicate possible mistakes about eternal verities? Think about a few times that you have been honestly mistaken about anything.

THINK! IT'S A GOOD TRICK IF YOU CAN DO IT!

"And she went and did according to the saying of Elijah: and she, and he, and her house, did eat many days. And the barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord, which he spake by Elijah." I Kings 17: 15-16.

From the pages of antiquity comes an unusual, arresting story that the Lord Jesus would use hundreds of years later. It would offer the Pharisees, and all future generations, an opportunity to rethink their spiritual position.

Now, as then, there are those who feel that they have God franchised; that if He does anything at all, He will either consult with, or work through them. Not so! This writer has profound respect for the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, but it remains possible for a church to become just as the ancient Pharisees were in this regard.

So, jumping in thought from the ancient days to the ministry of Jesus, we hear him saying in confrontation with the Pharisees, *"But I tell you of a truth, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elias, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when great famine was throughout all the land; But unto none of them was Elias sent, save unto Sarepta, a city of Sidon, unto a woman that was a widow."* 4:25-26. This so infuriated the good folks in the synagogue at Nazareth that they sought to cast Jesus off a mountain. (What kind of righteousness is that?)

Things have not changed over the years. People are thinking, believing, doing wrong, and when confronted with truth, they have two options, repent of it and change, or retain error, and become angry. Blessed are those who do the former.

But the ancient Pharisees were so much like many modern religionists. They were so steeped in traditions, many of which supplanted the Word of God, that they became blinded to opportunities around them, and the magnificent, awesome possibilities afforded to those who simply trust, and do so with childlike faith. We should pray that our minds and hearts be more as parachutes and less like concrete.

So, just why did God bypass His people of covenant in the days of Elias to bring such a blessing and marvelous story into the Word using someone estranged from that covenant? It was for the very purpose that Jesus used it hundreds of years later. Also, He doubtlessly knew this common, human failure was not restricted to the Jews, but would afflict His people down through the centuries. By it, a wonderful goad was created for His people of all time.

Sometimes, great blessings in harmony with the Word, lie just outside the box of long held traditions. Then, let no power succeed in leaving one fearful or derelict to explore the principles of the eternal Word. THINK!

FOR THOUGHT: What is the problem with folks thinking they have a franchise on God?

Does a covenant with God equal a franchise? Why? Why not?

Are there any constraints to be observed in thinking outside the box about the Word?

Do you think the widow in this story was a woman of faith to share the last bit of food she and her son had to keep them alive with a stranger purporting to be a prophet of God?

THOU SHALT NOT SEETHE A KID IN HIS MOTHER'S MILK

This commandment is repeated in Exodus 23:19, and in 34:26. In each instance it is connected with the law of first fruits, the bounty of harvest, and how to properly acknowledge God as the One Who provides prosperity and health. What does it mean? Think with me!

Although this simple, but strong, command may seem somewhat strange to modern ears, it made important sense in the context of its days. The Hebrews had learned much in the pagan world of their environment, even much that they must unlearn. It was an apparent custom of many religious, superstitious nations to boil a very young goat or lamb in its mother's milk as a sacrificial offering to the gods of harvest. The kid was the product of life and the milk the sustenance of life. They would sprinkle this life-soup around their fruit trees and fields, believing this would be accepted by idols of their imagination, and their crops made to be bountiful next season.

God demanded the first fruits of harvest, but He also demanded to be recognized and worshipped as the Living God Who blessed and prospered His people. They were not to engage in heathen practices, and particularly one so cruel as to boil a newborn in the life-giving milk of its mother. The Living God of love and compassion toward His people would suffer the death of animals only under specific conditions, mostly for food, for sacrifices depicting the awfulness of sin, and depicting the hideous sacrifice it would require of the Sinless Son of God to expunge those sins from the repentant.

Heathen practices remain in our modern world. Men think to gain the favor of God through personal sacrifices, good works, rituals, etc., etc. These are nothing short of mockery and cruelty to the blessedness of the once-for-all sacrifice of the Lamb of God. What then does God require of every member of the condemned human race? Not to trust in or practice silly, cruel, vain things, but to look to God's sacrifice and *"believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved and thy house."* Acts 16:31.

FOR THOUGHT: The pagan practice of worshipping fertility led to rituals strictly forbidden by the Lord to His people. How did the idea of fertility and life play into a kid being seethed in its mother's milk?

Name three reasons why the Bible sanctioned the taking of animal life.

After considering the information in this article, does the command in Exodus 23:19 make sense?

Thoughts
on
Discipleship

W. A.
Dillard

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101 THINGS TO DO

Recently on a trip out west, the two hours difference between Central and Pacific time found me up at about 5:30 as usual. The only problem: it was only 3:30 local time. Retreating to the small lobby of the quaint hotel in historic Groveland, CA, I saw a commercial paper on the coffee table entitled 101 THINGS TO DO IN THE YOSEMITE AREA. I read many of them with interest but failed to notice any reference to spiritual activities. Of course, that precipitated paper and pen.

Now in the life of most Americans, one may feel as though there are 1,001 things to do. Similarly, few, if any, of these may include spiritual activities. Does this not underscore a terribly skewed lifestyle? Inasmuch as one's approximate "threescore and ten" years on this terrestrial ball, compared to the endless ages to live beyond this brief journey, does it not make much more sense to live in continued preparation for that which is to come?

Certainly, one cannot escape many mundane demands in life, but to live as though this world were all there is to life is to play the role of a fool . . . who says in his heart, "There is no God; hence, no accountability to a higher power." This is the ultimate folly of men reputed to be educated and intelligent. Could it be that some are educated beyond their intelligence??

Solomon, the wisest man to walk these paths of life left no little information about what men should be pursuing in the brevity of their days. At the end of his writing in Ecclesiastes, he pungently summarized, *"Let us hear the conclusion of the matter: fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man."* Ecc. 12:13.

Common observation provides evidence that most men are derelict in their duty, not understanding that they will live for millions of timeless years regretting it. So, 101 things to do, or 1,001 things to do, wisdom says: prioritize and see to it that personal repentance from sin and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is number ONE! Then living in discipleship to the Savior is to follow consistently. Whatever else is left to do is of little consequence in the scheme of things. Doubtless, readers have many things to do. Now, what about priority? Each person really is on this planet for specific purposes. Understanding that, let the wisdom of Solomon be heard and heeded!

FOR THOUGHT: The songwriter penned, "It's a long, long time from May to December, but the days grow short when you reach September." The swiftness of time finds all but those who are wise nearing the end of earthly life with days consumed with 101 things to do. How many of those 101 things are given to spiritual readiness for eternity? May the cries of wisdom still find a hearing ear in today's society? Why? Why not?

A MENTAL CHALLENGE FROM GOD

All who take the name of Christ Jesus in salvation and discipleship are issued a distinct mental challenge from God. To ignore it is folly, incurring great loss. To take it up is to benefit in eternal reward. What is this mental challenge? It is to have the same mindset as Jesus did in His earthly ministry. Now wait! Don't you dare shut your mind down to this challenge under the puny excuse that you can't do that because you still live in the sinful flesh. God knows that! Furthermore, He is not playing mind games with His people. Let's think for a minute!

There is always an excuse for failure. He addressed that in Phil. 2: 3-4, but the biblical admonition is to overcome the excuses by dedication to the practices set forth in the grace and word of God. The apostle Paul appealed to the church at Philippi, and by application to the Lord's true churches throughout the age, to press forward in Christian maturity to fulfill both his joy, as well as the joy of the Master. He was specific in the challenge. Said he, if there be any consolation, comfort of love, fellowship of the Spirit, any compassion and mercies, they would fulfill his joy by being of one mind in these Christian qualities. The bottom line is concisely stated in Phil. 2:5, *"Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus."*

Consider then the exaltation/abasement of the God-man Jesus. He was in the form of God. He did not consider it robbery to be counted equal with God but did not seek a reputation for Himself. He took upon Himself the form of a slave and humbled Himself in obedience even to the death of the cross.

Folks can twist the scriptures of Philippians 2:1-5, as many do, and surely will, but they remain in their purity the inspired Word of God; a challenge to every Christian to, as Peter puts it, *"that ye should follow in his steps."* Still, many prefer to whine that they can't do that! It cramps their style. What can one say? Poor ole God! In His infinite wisdom He asks us to do what we cannot do even with His divine help. Doubtless, all of His people would do well to remember more of the inspired Word, such as *"Ye are bought with a price; therefore, glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's."*

Here then is the meaning and challenge of true Christianity. It is sad that in too many churches the main motivation is social instead of spiritual, and the whine may be often heard: "There is nothing to do at our church!" If that indeed be so, may I introduce you to biblical Christianity? God has a mental, and spiritual, challenge especially for you!

FOR THOUGHT: Men have made machines that are indeed a marvel, but how do they compare to humanity?

Does the Creator not know the capabilities of every person?

Do you think most Christians could surprise themselves if they allowed God to work through them instead of feeling all the responsibility was on them?

A QUESTION SEARCHING THE SOUL: “WHY?”

“To be or not to be” is not so much the question. Rather, it is “shall I increase or decrease?” Let me explain!

Fleshly ego is much like the stomach: it may get filled, but it is never satisfied. It must be oft repeated. Fleshly ego unleashed in the world of religion is no different to what it is in any other endeavor: it always seeks ascendancy, and soon the tail is wagging the dog. Let me illustrate. A preacher desiring to build his own little kingdom had a dream. In the dream he had a conversation with the Lord Who inquired what he wanted to do in his ministry. The preacher said he wanted to be blessed. The Lord asked, “Why?” He replied that he wanted to be a successful, fireball-type preacher that folks would love. The Lord asked, “Why?” The preacher then replied that he wanted to build a really large church. The Lord asked, “Why?” Befuddled with the repeated, pointed question, he awoke. Then he gave serious introspection to his purpose and calling.

The calling and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ is not a calling to personal ascendancy. Quite the opposite is denoted in the term “ministry.” Moreover, greatness in the sight of God is extremely different to that concept in the sight of men. John the Baptist met this issue head on when his disciples, perhaps a little jealous, expressed concern that Jesus, whom John had introduced, was becoming the focal point of activity rather than John. To this concern, John replied in poignant words that should fill the heart and mind of every modern-day minister: *“He must increase, but I must decrease”* John 3:30. Which of the apostles finished their course in spectacular material achievements? Who among them went out in flames of glory? To their credit, they accepted the decrease that He might be honored with the increase. Only the apostles John and Peter are known to have finished life in old age. John concluded earthly life in exile on Patmos, and still in an activity of enormous value, being used by God to give us the Revelation book of the New Testament.

So, what is important? It is not the size of a congregation being served. Neither is it the buildings built, but it is holding up the Head of the spiritual body, even Christ Jesus. One may plant, another water, but it is God who gives the increase, and the increase God gives is not measured in the number of bodies that fill the pews occasionally or the fatness of the offering plates. Rather, it is the harvest of souls in the new birth experience, and their growth in knowledge and grace in the faith once delivered to the saints. All else is vain simply because *“Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it....”* Psalm 127:1. Let it be forever settled then, “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

FOR THOUGHT: It is the common, natural tendency to ever increase one’s mastery, acceptability, service opportunities, etc., but how does this natural tendency square with John 3:30? How does it square with Luke 17:10? How do these verses of scripture harmonize with the love and zeal one finds in Christ? Explain!

A THOUSAND MILE JOURNEY

"The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord: and he delighteth in his way." Psalm 37:23.

It is said that a journey of one thousand miles begins with a single step. Continued increments of one step at a time will eventually get one to that goal. A recent study underscoring how many steps people in America take each day, actually measured by a pedometer revealed that men walk only slightly more steps each day than women do, on average. Men walked 5340 to women, 4912. Doing a little math based on the average stride of two and one-half feet per step, this amounts to a little over two and one-half miles per day. Given that as true, the thousand-mile journey would be completed in a little less than two years. Of course, these steps do not literally mean a straight-line journey or that they are taken toward a specific destination; rather they mean achievement of the affairs of daily life. If one is blessed with good health, many such journeys will be made. But wait! Think with me for a moment!

Whether one's physical steps be many or few is not nearly as important as how, and why they are made. Truly, the steps of the spiritual walk of life are what count both for time and eternity. This is why such great verses of scripture as 1 Peter 2:21 are recorded in Holy Writ: *"For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps:"* Underscore the last five words: Ye should follow his steps. How keen are my memories as a small lad following dad in the fields? Wherever dad's footprints were made in the sod were exactly where my feet also landed even if it required a jump. To be like dad was always the goal of the journey of so many footsteps. How easily those memories are recalled!

Extrapolate that into the all-important journey into eternity. A trip down memory lane allows one a sense of measurement of life. Footsteps are traceable and meaningful. Likewise, the footsteps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, David tells us in Psalm 37. Pause to look at those footprints. They began at the foot of the cross on Golgotha. Moreover, if they lead to the goals of life the Lord has ordered and exemplified, they lead consistently to a mature Christian, skilled in the Holy Word, one who will be richly rewarded in the Day of the Lord.

The new year is at hand, yet some may tend to recoil at the prospects of a thousand-mile journey but should not. After all, the spiritual journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step of a one-on-one meeting with Christ Jesus. Please take that step!

FOR THOUGHT: Of the many steps taken each day, how many do you suppose are taken that follow the footsteps of Jesus? Would the percentage be miniscule?

In a fast food, all things ready in an instant type of world, is it any wonder that the prospects of a "thousand-mile journey" spiritually brings discouragement? On the other hand, is it not true that the journey of life is the important thing to get right and enjoy?

A WAY TO KNOW

From the earliest of days, the Creator God of heaven and earth initiated incremental revelation of Himself to man. This process began in Genesis 2:4 where the first compound name of God appears as “LORD God” or in Hebrew “Jehovah-Elohim.” Jehovah or Yahweh as modern scholars like to transliterate that name, then becomes compounded with more than a dozen other names of God as he moves into various office works to fulfill the needs of fallen mankind in general, and His people in particular. This is also His name that He revealed to Moses upon his inquiry at the burning bush.

Thus, revelation of knowledge, from mundane things to salvation, and from acceptable service to the terms of eternal hope, becomes the innate outreach of God to men, and to His people of covenant in particular. He revealed to Cain and Abel how to make an acceptable, sacrificial offering; to Noah how to build and preserve an ark; to Abraham his plan to visit Sodom and Gomorrah with destruction. Notice His respect to the patriarch in Genesis 18:17-19. *“And the LORD said, ‘Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do; Seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment; that the LORD may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him.’”*

God’s revelation of Himself continued to grow throughout the Old Testament to the ultimate expression of Himself in Jesus the Christ. Heb. 1:1-3. However, there is more to come. The fullness of the revelation of Christ Jesus is spoken of in the last book of the Bible in scenes yet to unfold: “The Revelation of Jesus Christ.”

The point is made that God has never been without a witness on earth. Furthermore, He has always seen to it that His witness has all of the knowledge of Him and His work and ways that are necessary for the completion of His overall plan with man. Agnostics and skeptics may decry the idea of such spiritual understanding, but that is their problem. God has consistently taken care of, and revealed needful knowledge to, His people of covenant since the call of Abraham over four thousand years ago. Indeed, the fullness of His revealed knowledge continues to reside in that context today. Note the testimony of Ephesians 3:9-12, *“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: In whom we have boldness and access with confidence by the faith of him.”*

So, there it is! The fullness of God’s truth is revealed and resident in the house of God which is the true church of God, the pillar and ground of the truth, I Tim 3:15. It is in this state of submissive discipleship that the Holy Spirit of God illuminates minds and hearts to His Word and Will. Do you want to understand more of what will affect you forever? Receive Jesus into your heart through repentance from sin, exercising faith in His cross work for you. Follow Him in scriptural baptism, then fellowship in a New Testament church as a practicing disciple. You will learn! You will know!

FOR THOUGHT: If the New Testament lays out God’s plan for His people, how will His will ever be known if the teachings of the New Testament are ignored?
Are spiritual things spiritually discerned?

ABOARD THE MISSIONS BUS: WHO IS DRIVING?

Having been asked several times a number of years ago about proper methods of mission endeavors, this writer authored a small booklet for group studies entitled: To The World We Go, which was published by Bogard Press. Although it did not experience great popularity, typical of most Bible based books, yet some still ask for a copy.

One of the features of the little book emphasizes the Bible model of doing mission work. Most often this comes into play in the process of a missionary and a sponsoring church joining together to promote and accomplish gospel work in a particular place, with prayerful hopes of an indigenous church being the ultimate result.

One strain on the Bible pattern is usually seen in a minister running up and down the country in search of a sponsoring church to give his work legitimacy as well as financial support.

In the aforementioned book, it is written, *"It is a sad state of affairs when a church will endorse their pastor to do mission work when he is inept at pastoral work, and they simply want to be rid of him. It is bad business also for a church to go out in search of a missionary simply because of the prestige of having one. It is an accident finding a place to happen when a missionary is running up and down the road looking for an endorsing church and one takes him on unaware of important background and circumstances."*

Many missionary/church relationship problems could be avoided if the New Testament model were more strictly followed. In Acts 13 it is revealed that the Holy Spirit called men to missionary service who were already busily engaged in Bible teaching. They were Spirit-filled and had the respect of the church of their membership. Their church, too, was zealous for the Word and for souls. Moreover, great unanimity prevailed because of the presence of God in the endeavor promoting mutual love and respect between the church and the ministers.

If missionaries and sponsoring churches have to part ways, it would be extremely well for any future connection with either of the two to be well known and understood. Be sure it is not the motivations of men, but the Spirit of God that is driving the missions bus!

FOR THOUGHT: How many mission failures can you recall that were due to parties unknown to each other joining forces?

What do you see as the Bible pattern for successful mission work?

Do you think there is any chance for a mission work to be fruitful if God is not in it? Why?

ABRAHAMIC COVENANT COMPREHENSIVE

“They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed.” Romans 9:8.

Bible students find it most interesting to study the record of God’s work with mankind as it unfolds in the form of covenants. They pour over them all. Some of these were targeted to a specific time and people, and the three that garners the most attention are the Abrahamic Covenant, the Law Covenant, and the Church (or New) Covenant. Unfortunately, many fall victim to the unspiritual and undiscerning writers whose purpose appears to be that of serving mammon through the sale of religious material. The pitfall is the lack of understanding of what the covenants are all about. Think with me for a minute.

The Abrahamic Covenant is viewed as the unconditional love of God for man by which he may be saved. The Law Covenant is viewed as the standard God will accept for a person to be saved, and the Church Covenant is viewed as the aggregate of all those who have availed themselves of the grace of God and are thus saved. All Three of these positions are so wrong!

The covenants are all, whether conditional or unconditional, made as agreements or contracts between God and His people. The children of Israel in Egyptian bondage were the people of God who had knowledge of, and enacted cries based on, the covenant made with Abraham. It was to them that the Law was given as a schoolmaster to bring them to a spiritual understanding and appreciation of God’s manifestation as Christ and all that He taught as such. That brought them to the church covenant and its marvelous grace in spiritual maturity. But what about the initial covenant with the patriarch of faith: Abraham? He was God’s man when He called him out of Ur of Chaldea. With Abraham, God enacted a covenant of faith to compass His work with man from the childhood stage, spiritually (law), to the mature son stage (church), by which a people would be prepared to rule and to reign with Him in the millennial kingdom. Paul makes much of this in his writings to the churches of Galatia and to the church at Rome.

When Christ returns and sets up the millennial kingdom using the spiritually mature saints to rule in it, all will be accomplished that he began to do in Abraham so long ago. What a joy then, to be, as Isaac was, a child NOT of the flesh, but of promise!

FOR THOUGHT: Do you see that the terms of the covenants (Abrahamic, Law, and Church) are basically not spirit salvation covenants, though all are predicated upon them. Rather they have to do with how to live life on earth that is pleasing to God and rewardable at His coming? If the law was our schoolmaster to bring us to the anointed, who is/are the anointed?

AIR-CONDITIONED CHRISTIANS

“And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold.” Matt. 24:12.

The past few decades of vaunted progress have given Adam's race no few creature comforts, not the least of which is air conditioning. It is almost a necessity in southern parts of the country where high temperatures and equally high humidity send all who are able scurrying to the cool indoors. Of course, a very large crowd of Christians will endure extreme heat, humidity, rain, etc. for hours at a sporting event, but would never subject themselves to a short worship service if the air is not conditioned for comfort. This underscores the point I am attempting to make.

In the Hebrew Old Testament, the common word for “cold” as in lower temperatures is “qal.” Its Greek equivalent in the New Testament is “psucho”, which specifically refers to a lowering of temperature by the process of blowing or evaporation; the same thing as modern air conditioning. Metaphorically, it denotes a cooling of love, zeal, or desire for a thing, and names the responsible, causative agent: the abounding of iniquity. To be more specific, it is the individual reaction to the abundance of iniquity. What does this mean?

Iniquity is sin, to be sure, but a specific type of sin. The term means “no law” or “without law” and specifically to proceed in religious affairs not knowing, nor wanting to know, what the rules of God (His Word) teaches. In the vernacular it may be stated, “I know what I want to do, or believe, so don't confuse me with the facts.”

It is sometimes difficult for New Testament church members to follow the plain teaching of the Word when others all around them make a loud claim to be Christian but have little to no regard for the Word. Such cooling for God, His Word, His church, is not a sudden turn of events, but a slow, consistent process. Discouragement pervades the psyche of the nominal Christian who is by virtue of spiritual immaturity, totally unsuited for pressure, ridicule, or persecution in any form. He then finds himself aligning more closely with the unfaithful and practitioners of iniquity: thus is he air-conditioned, getting cooler, colder, cold! One need not be highly intelligent to identify this as a current, widespread reality, but though it is happening as Jesus said it would, one does not have to be identified among the “many” in that process.

Consider that “God reacts to man as man reacts to God!” is indeed a true statement. Hear the apostle James, *“Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded.”* There is much joy and excitement in witnessing this age come to a close. Doubtlessly, but though troublesome and sometimes most stressful, this is the grandest time to be a knowledgeable Christian on the planet, but you can't see it if you have waxed cold.

FOR THOUGHT: Is iniquity (everyone doing his own thing, religiously) the cooling agent affecting Christians, or is it their reaction to that iniquity? Explain what you mean? Can you vocalize the stages of the cooling to cold process that grips many Christians? How much do you think you are affected by the actions of others in your circle of friends?

ANCIENT COVENANTS REMAIN AND THEY MATTER

How beautiful is the Rainbow! Moreover, its importance is far greater than simply being esoteric. It reminds one of gigantic, divine promises: promises in covenantal terms of God dealing with man, and man dealing with man. Here are interesting concepts, parts of which have been willfully ignored and forgotten. Think with me for a moment!

In the destruction of the ungodly antediluvian world, eight humans were saved from the worldwide cataclysm of water. It was then up to Noah and his family to repopulate the earth, and in doing so, rebuild society on a more stable foundation, humanly speaking.

So, to give all ensuing generations unequivocal assurances that a hydraulic cataclysm would never again destroy all the inhabitants of earth, God put a rainbow in the clouds. Men still rejoice at the sight of it, and they remember that it is God's unconditional covenant with mankind that prevents a flood of water from ever again destroying all life on earth. The rainbow remains, and it matters!

But that is not all there is to the Noahic Covenant. Read about it in Genesis 9. God established a fear and dread of mankind upon the animal, fowl, and fish kingdoms. That fear and dread largely remains!

Additionally, God gave every living thing that moves upon the earth as a dietary selection for mankind, including herbs. Much to the emphatic disdain heaped upon this concept by P.E.T.A., and others of their stripe, this dietary selection remains.

But that, and more, much more, is included in the Noahic Covenant. God placed a societal cornerstone, enabling the progress of civilization and preventing its total corruption as before. That cornerstone is capital punishment. It is now a repugnant concept to modern society which prefers to wallow in progressive deterioration while calling it progress. Hear the words of that cornerstone: *"And surely your blood of your lives will I require; at the hand of every beast will I require it, and at the hand of man; at the hand of every man's brother will I require the life of man. Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man."* Genesis 9:5-6. Quite quickly, some will protest this; saying that we are no longer under the old law. But, friends, this was before the law by hundreds of years. It remains in effect as surely as does the promise of the rainbow. Every bleeding heart that says capital punishment is no deterrent to crime labels "Lie" to God's Word. You see, the rainbow of God's covenant is a coalition of the tenants mentioned in Genesis 9. Every one of them is in force today as they were then. Men may ignore them, but the judge of all the earth will call each man, state, and nation in every governmental form into judgment on the premise (among other things) of this rainbow covenant of remembrance that matters.

FOR THOUGHT: Name at least three things God set in the Noahic Covenant for the benefit of men throughout time.

Do you think these are respected by today's societies or largely ignored? Why?

What does history consistently teach will happen when God's covenants are ignored?

ANTEDILUVIAN LESSONS FOR MODERN SAINTS

All that we know about the antediluvian world is contained mostly in the first six chapters of the Bible. Yet, what a tremendous storehouse of lessons for modern saints may be found there. Think with me about one of them.

Genesis 5 presents proper names of the lineage, both of the sons of God and the sons of men, i.e., the lineage of Adam through Seth as the Sons of God, and the lineage of Cain as the sons of men.

Of the former, the last two men to die before the flood were Methuselah and Lamech, who both died in the same year the flood came upon the earth.

Since ancient names were most meaningful, special attention is paid to their definition, and to two or three specifically. Enoch (dedicated), the great grandfather of Noah, walked with God and God took him. He is one of two men in history who did not die but was translated. (Elijah was the other). Enoch knew much and was aware of the coming catastrophe. Consequently, he named his son, the longevity record holder, "Methuselah," which means "When he dies it will come." or, "When he dies, he will send it." Methuselah named his son Lamech (Powerful). He in turn named his son Noah (rest). Noah would give rest to the world from the awful, global wickedness that prevailed in that time.

Jesus adamantly prophesied that the wickedness of Noah's day would be the common motivation of life before His return. Note Matthew 24:39. It is almost unarguable today that the world is largely sensual and lawless, becoming more so as it increases in complexity.

The flood came upon the people unaware and in surprise. The result was global death to all except those in the Ark. But they were not without witness in Noah and his preaching while building the Ark, but they could not, would not, hear. In like manner, modern educational forces of evolution of species, and lauding of humanism and ecumenism are effectively marginalizing the message of Holy Writ, preparing the stage for what is to come.

It must be noted that Noah and his family were not the only saved people of his day. There were possibly thousands of infants who had not reached the age of accountability, plus a lot of folks who knew God nominally, but lived in accord with the wicked world to the losing of their life. Peter mentions that Jesus preached to them during the days His body was entombed. I Peter 3:20. Those who are wise pay attention to history. Millenniums of time do not erase its timely lessons.

FOR THOUGHT: What do you think may have been going on before the flood that is not going on now?

Do you see the world as becoming more sensual? More distant from Bible teachings?

Do you think there may be sins in society today that were not named in pre-flood days?

APOSTASY PORTRAYAL A DEADLY SIN

Warning the church of the Living God at Corinth, the beloved Apostle Paul called attention to the terrible failures of Israel in the wilderness wanderings. In I Cor. 10:4, he recalls a most intriguing and interesting phenomenon. A certain rock appeared wherever the Hebrews made camp, as though it were (because it was) following them. Now this was not an ordinary rock. Paul calls it a spiritual rock. Doubtless it appeared as a large hunk of stone to the Hebrews, but something was very different about this rock. Its story begins early in the Hebrew exodus from Egypt. It is first mentioned in Exodus 17:5-7. Moses was instructed to smite the rock which would produce water in abundance for the people.

Since that spiritual rock followed them, it is not known how many appearances it made or how many times the Hebrews took special note of it, or how many times they may have depended upon it for life-sustaining water. But it comes into significant play some forty years later as water was desperately needed, and the Hebrews were complaining because there was none. God's instruction to Moses now was different: *"Take the rod, and gather thou the assembly together, thou, and Aaron thy brother, and speak ye unto the rock before their eyes; and it shall give forth his water, and thou shalt bring forth to them water out of the rock: so, thou shalt give the congregation and their beasts drink."* Num. 20:8.

Most who are passingly familiar with the Bible know Moses and Aaron did not follow God's instructions, but in frustration with the people smote the rock twice. Yes, life-giving water flowed, but God was not sanctified in the eyes of the people, and it cost Aaron and Moses their lives.

That rock was not Jesus, but it was anointed (Christ is a Greek word that means anointed in English) of God to typify mighty things about Jesus. It showed, among other things, God's protection, solidarity, presence, and sustainment of life. What God has to give mankind is freely offered in Jesus, the Christ. He willingly died to give to all the water of everlasting life. He is with His people and will never forsake them: He is there! He never changes! Either He is one's life into the age of the ages, or that life shall be forfeited. Being once smitten, He will not be smitten again, but forgives all who call upon Him in repentance and faith.

The recipients of His righteous blood's cleansing that flowed from the smitten Anointed One commit a similar sin as Moses and Aaron when they claim they have become lost, and now must return to the Rock for a washing in His blood the second time. He will not be smitten again, but he may be spoken to in prayer and ... "if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." I John 1:9. Hallelujah! What a Rock is our Savior!

FOR THOUGHT: How does the anointed rock that followed the Hebrews in the desert parallel with the Anointed Son of God? Explain in your own words.

In the Old Testament, many things were anointed, but in the New Testament only two were. Can you identify those two?

ATTACHMENT TO DETACHMENT

Attachment to detachment; does this seem contradictory? To be sure, the words are opposite in meaning, but they are descriptive of a generation. Think with me for a moment!

Long, long ago, God forged a mighty nation of Hebrews enslaved in Egypt. He delivered them, blessed them, and brought them to the Promised Land. Extraordinary victories, great miracles, and provisions attributable only to God's blessings were embedded into minds and hearts, but Judges tells the repetitious story of the propensity of men to follow the flesh instead of God. "A new generation arose that knew not God." In another place, the prophet Isaiah said of them, *"But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear."* 59:2. Sadly, men have not changed!

Fast forward! Out of the deadly prosecutorial fires of the Inquisition, God delivered His people by opening up the Western Hemisphere in general, and America in particular, for their unparalleled freedom and growth. Through famine, wars, and civil turmoil, God blessed His churches in this new land. It was then that the god of this world laid plans to inundate the nation with material things far removed from its Gross National Product by printing script to direct faith to Caesar. Misled churches hailed this as blessings from above.

Simply put, it is easier and highly tempting to follow the dictates of the flesh. Soon, churches, which flourished briefly in inflated abundance, found that materialism had substituted God. Youth then failed to follow the faith of their fathers. Pulpits became filled with moderate preachers speaking to moderate congregations demanding the preachers become even more moderate. Services were scaled down. Revivals ceased. God was removed from public prayers and schools. Innocent lives were butchered on demand by the millions. Churches became even more moderate, bowing to a social agenda in an ever-losing battle for the attention of the masses. At last, some have awakened to ask why the rolls are full, but the pews are empty? It is the continuing last state of churches whose members are detached from the spirit and mission of the church. Oh, but those roll members are indeed attached. They are attached to their detachment, and few are open to change. Churches have offered men spiritual salvation and truth. But, in their panic of material debts, they gravitated to social programs, and now find themselves with nothing more to offer. Padlocks are not uncommon. What a crazy course of history! What foolish decisions by spiritual institutions! Is it possible for the detached to now become reattached? Probably not if Hebrews 6:1-6 means anything at all.

FOR THOUGHT: Do you see a generation attached to their detachment from the will and ways of God? If so, what do you think is the cause?

Does this article bring to mind the teaching of Jesus that no man can serve two masters?

BAPTISM OR BAPTISMS

In expressing the unity of the faith, Paul told the Ephesians, *“One Lord, one faith, one baptism...”* Eph. 4:5. But one reads in the scriptures about the baptism of the Spirit, water baptism of believers in Jesus, and the suffering of Jesus is referred to as a baptism. So just what does it mean to say “one baptism?”

The word “baptism” comes from the Greek word “baptizo”, which means to dip or plunge. It is consistently referred to as a total inundation so much so that it is also portrayed as a burial. There is a sense that anything one may immerse himself in could be called a baptism. This is how it is used with reference to the suffering of Jesus. He would be immersed in pain and suffering.

However, the mainstream, biblical context of the word references water baptism of a professed believer by the authority of a New Testament Church. The other main reference using that word is the baptism of the Holy Spirit that came upon the church on the day called Pentecost. So, how then is it to be referenced as one?

Some would have you believe that only Spirit baptism is important, and that occurs in the minute of one’s spiritual salvation. Not so! That line is pure universal church heresy. Still others would have you believe that Holy Spirit baptism can only occur AFTER water baptism, and that upon the select few who diligently implore the Holy Spirit to accommodate them. Not so! That is pure holy roller heresy!

The truth of the matter is settled in long ago typology in the Old Testament. When the Hebrews were freed from Egyptian slavery, they came out after applying the blood of the Passover Lamb. Then they were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea. Again, it was **IN THE CLOUD AND IN THE SEA**. It was a simultaneous thing. Baptism is an immersion in water. A cloud is water even though it was a manifestation of the Spirit of God. The Hebrews were completely immersed with walls of water about them, and the cloud of water, even the Spirit of God, over and about them.

Today when a professed believer is scripturally baptized, it is in water, but he is baptized to fellowship in the New Covenant, the practical expression of which is the New Testament Church where the baptism of the Holy Spirit abides and has, since Pentecost, in special office work. By this the obedient believer is enabled to be led to spiritual maturity. So, it all occurs at once, as the scriptures plainly state: “...one lord, one faith, one baptism.” Scriptural baptism lasts forever, it can never be repeated.

FOR THOUGHT: Do you see the ancient pattern foreshadowing New Testament life: first the Passover blood, then water and spirit baptism, then following God, being led by the Holy Spirit through the wilderness, across Jordan into the Promised Land? Did you notice that like salvation, baptism, once accomplished, cannot be repeated? Explain in your words why this is so.

BEWARE THE LION

Evil is referenced as a lion several times in the scriptures. One reference is late in the New Testament where it is written, *“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.”* I Peter 5:8. Another is early in the Old Testament where it is written: *“If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, **sin lieth at the door**. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.”* Genesis 4:7. Here the words “sin lieth at the door” references a crouching lion ready to spring upon his prey.

The Genesis reference is intriguing. These words were spoken to Cain before his sin of murder committed upon his brother Abel. The call was a call to repentance from sin, repentance toward God, and a dedication to walk in His ways. Even after a crime as terrible as Cain’s, there can be forgiveness, restitution to right living, and acceptance before God. We may not always understand this fully, but it certainly does magnify the glorious grace of our altogether wonderful God. But there is more. This verse is a stern warning that if repentance from evil deeds, and a dedication to walking in God’s Word and ways is absent, evil will spring upon such a one for it is always crouching down at the door desiring to spring upon the unrepentant Christian. *“Unto thee shall be his desire.”* Satan desires believers as he desired Peter that he might sift him as wheat. *“You shall rule over him”*, that is the case IF one does that which is right. In so doing Satan cannot spring upon God’s child as a roaring lion, but let that child turn from God and His ways, and Satan will have a field day, destroying his life and influence.

This, then, is the import of I Peter 5:8. It is a clear warning that no one should misunderstand. BE CAREFUL, BE VIGILANT. For how long? Always! Why? Because there is an adversary, and he is the devil. This adversary seeks to devour careless disciples because he despises them and all that they stand for as knowledgeable children of God. What will he do? He will bring trouble such as one thought not possible. He will cause things to happen that will literally destroy the influence of life, and if possible, cut the days of one’s life very short. In such destruction, he takes great delight. He is not compassionate. He has no conscience. However, he is patient enough to lead victims down a destructive path so gently that they may not realize he has led them off a cliff until they are irretrievably falling. How may one deal with this? Must one live in constant fear? No! Rather life should be lived in love with the sweet Savior, while shunning the very appearance of evil. In so doing the disciple will never experience the terror and loss inflicted by the lion.

FOR THOUGHT: Have you heard the roar of the disciple-hungry lion?

Why does he hate Christians so much?

What are some of the things the lion uses to attract nominal Christians to destruction?

What is the key to ruling over the lion? Explain.

BEYOND KNOWING: TRUSTING! (THE IMPORTANT MIXTURE OF FAITH)

“Let us therefore fear, lest a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it. For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it.” Hebrew 4:1-2.

How great is the good news from Divinity?! It is fraught with promises of wonderful things which God has for those who believe in Him and follow Him. The context of Hebrews Chapter Four necessitates the inclusion of the last few verses of Chapter Three. Here, ancient Israel is held up as an example of warning to modern day church saints. It speaks of the generation of Hebrews that came out of Egyptian bondage, but who refused to exercise faith in the promises of God, by which they were denied His rest, and the blessings of the Promised Land.

Notice the symbolism (1 Cor.10:1-11): Delivered by the blood; baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; traversing desert wasteland under the protection and provision of God to the Promised Land; crossing the Jordan River to enter the new land, and the new life which is there. Those symbols are recognized today as our deliverance by the blood, baptism in water to walk in newness of life; traversing the desert of this worldly life; crossing our Jordan of death to enter His rest and all of its attendant blessings.

So, the writer of Hebrews says that both they and us are recipients of the gospel (good news). *“But the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it.”* Then, the warning: *“Let us therefore fear...”* You see, it is one thing to be spiritually saved, and quite another to exercise faith in following God. The Hebrews were saved, baptized people, but died because of a lack of faith. The important phrase is *“...not being mixed with faith...”*

Today, there are a lot of people who are saved, but who are not hearing the Word with that all important mixture of faith. They are often regular church attenders, but church means little more than a civic club or a social event. Soon, such religious practices become dull, boring, and the probability of falling by the wayside looms imminent.

In the ancient language, “being mixed with” is a composite of two words, “together,” plus “to mingle or mix”. Let there be no misunderstanding of the lesson. Those who receive the promises are not those who simply hear them or can quote them only, but those who believe them with all their heart. With all of your Bible knowledge, do you have this underscored mixture of faith in the Word?

FOR THOUGHT: How hard does the Bible constrain your life in discipleship?

Do you see a parallel between Israel’s faithlessness in the wilderness and a lot of church members dealing with their journey through this world of endless temptations?

If you are a saved, scripturally baptized person fellowshiping in a New Testament church, do you realize you have help to strengthen faith that others outside do not, who are outside your fellowship?

How much do you see the Old Testament events relating to your personal life as a Christian? Explain.

BIAS VS. BOASTFUL

“But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the counsel of God against themselves, being not baptized of him.” Luke 7:30.

The question arises from time to time, but recently more often: Is there bias in Baptist churches and literature against baptism? The question does not mean to indicate that Baptists are openly critical of, or disdainful of baptism, rather they tend to push it into the background or omit discussing it to avoid conflicting discussions with others not of their stripe. Think a minute!

One evidence is a lack of underscoring its significance from pulpits. Ministers may feel intimidated by former waves of heresy surrounding the ordinance resulting in ministers being labeled in unfavorable ways. That may not be the case, but whatever it is, there is a widespread toning down of its meaning, importance, and beauty.

Another evidence shows up in literature. The spiritual new birth is heavily emphasized, which is good, but to indicate that one has all that is important, or that there is full leadership accessibility of the Holy Spirit, in rebellion or neglect of divine instructions regarding proper baptism and subsequent fellowship in a true New Testament church, is to negate the very thrust of the New Testament itself. Whom do we fear, God or man? Whom do we seek to not offend by this subject, God or man?

When Baptists are biased against the joyful presentation of baptism are they ashamed of it, or do they think to win others by cunning deception in matters of truth? Baptism has long served as the door to church membership predicated on the new birth. If Baptists are not seeking to win folks to proper New Testament church membership, they are not ministering the New Testament purpose. The new birth is as old as Adam's sin in Eden, and while the New Covenant is predicated upon it, so was the Old Covenant as well. To fail in these matters is to fall into the practice of abandoning new believers to the clutches of heretical religious organizations as so many modern “evangelists” do.

It is important to emphasize the will of God for every new believer of the gospel. Pentecost is fundamentally important. There is an office work of the Holy Spirit to, and in, the Lord's church whose benefit the unbaptized, unchurched miss. If the ordinance were not absolutely important, it would not be the consistent teaching of the New Covenant. Let such scripture verses as Luke 7:30, Matt. 28:19, Acts 2:38, and Romans 6:1-5 be revisited and indelibly impressed in hearts and minds.

On the other hand, to be boastful tends to create carnal elitism. There is a thin line, but a definite line between a sense of thankfulness for one's understanding and blessings, and a sense of arrogance or superiority that one may have over another by supposed greater knowledge.

Then let us witness the full truth in love for the Lord and His purpose but be quick to attribute all of these things to the goodness of God which all may have who will believe and follow Him.

FOR THOUGHT: What do you think Luke 7:30 is teaching?

May one omit the first step in obedience, and still be obedient?

What or how much of the Bible is unimportant? If all is important, does that not include the ordinance of baptism? Where then is boasting?

BIBLE BOREDOM

Is it possible to actually become bored with the Bible? If the practice of the majority of folks who call themselves “Christian” is offered for an answer to the question, the answer would have to be a resounding “Yes!” No other book in history has been so widely owned and so seldom read! Think about it for a moment.

Multitudes of people who were raised in a “church” environment remember with fondness the Bible stories so attractive to children: Creation; Noah and the flood; King Solomon; Jonah and the whale; Daniel and the Lion’s Den; the three Hebrew children; and the Nativity of Jesus, etc. Too many of these folks joyfully received the arresting stories, then considered themselves Bible orientated, and closed the book forever, without realizing how inexhaustible the spiritual applications and meanings are, as well as the unbroken connection of them all. The knowledge, wisdom, and burning hope their messages implant with the rest of the Word are unparalleled in the human heart because they are spirit and they are life! The Psalmist declared, *“More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.”* Psalm 19:10. Ignorance of Holy Writ by those who take upon themselves the name of Christ Jesus is responsible for a myriad of heresies. By these things men are plunged into iniquity with the mistaken idea that because they mean well and are sincere, it must be pleasing to God. For some, when Bible study is suggested, it is received as a suggestion to take a dose of castor oil! Excuses of archaic words; ideas beyond understanding, lack of time to devote to it together with outright boredom quickly surface as just reasons to avoid it.

Even preachers ought to read the Bible! Several have been known to drop out of the ministry because in their assessment they have preached all the sermons they can find in it, and they are bored with their own repetition, and the shallowness of the T.V. preachers from which they copy sermons. They have forgotten 2 Timothy 2:15. The truth of the matter is spiritual anemia will consistently be the symptoms of Bible boredom. Moreover, the underscored truth is that the University of Christ Jesus offers the only unfathomable textbook, and it does not include a baccalaureate degree. The Bible still causes the most serious, and decades long, student to soar heavenward in rapture divine as its contents are prayerfully studied. For one to say that the Bible is boring may well express his honest assessment at the time, but it speaks volumes about the spirituality and lack of dedication to discipleship of that person... and ... it is not good!

FOR THOUGHT: When is the last time you observed someone being enthusiastic about the prospects of Bible study? Did it make you wonder about that person?

If something instilled moments of great joy in your heart and mind, would it not be repeatedly sought? Do you think the Bible is capable of doing just that?

Could it be that the joy of increased Bible knowledge subtly transforms the mind as Paul told the Romans in 12:1-3?

BIBLE ENRICHMENTS IN FIGURES OF SPEECH

“And the disciples came, and said unto him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables? He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given.” Matthew 13:10-11.

In every language known to mankind, there is no shortage of figures of speech that serve to color, emphasize, and deepen the points of thought being presented. The Bible, far from being an exception to this, is a repository of dozens of kinds, and multiple usages of practically all of them.

Unfortunately, many students of the Word have not been exposed to a survey of the Bible from a “figures of language” viewpoint. So, some chap will roar in negative reply that the Bible must always be interpreted literally. Really? So, the Bible says, “All flesh is grass.” What grass is your flesh: Bermuda or Zoysia, Johnson grass or Centipede? Obviously, a figure of speech is in play. Had “like” or “as” been employed, it would be a simile, but in the absence of those words the figure simply calls one thing another; hence, it is a metaphor.

It is impossible for this article to be inclusive of all the figures of speech in the Bible. But a few are offered as an encouragement to recognize them, and to appreciate them for their rich enhancement to understanding the vivid points under consideration.

Parable: a continued simile such as Matt. 13, the parable of the sower, etc.

Idiom: particular words or phrases such as “break bread” to indicate “eat a meal.”

Hyperbole: exaggeration. Of Saul and Jonathan, David said, “They were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions.” Again, David said, “Rivers of water run down mine eyes. . .” Psalm 119:136.

Omission: words or meaning are purposefully left out, but the meaning of them is obvious. “For John came neither eating nor drinking.” Note Matt. 11:18. Obviously John had to eat and drink to live, but “declining invitations to eat with others” is the sense understood in the omission.

Allegory: a continued metaphor as Paul so wonderfully stated in Galatians 4:24.

Oxymoron: an apparent contradiction of word meanings as wise-fool or as one might humorously say in modern times. “military intelligence.”

There are more, so many more that a course in Biblical Figures of Speech is offered in many liberal arts colleges, and theological schools. Figures of speech make ideas vivid, more understandable, and memorable. After all, that is what language is supposed to do. So, far from weakening the inference of an implication, it strengthens it, and enhances the success of both speaker and hearer in sharing ideas. Surely, the author of language provided for our understanding these marvelous figures which fill His Word, and which He used in His mission on earth. Their presence enhances one’s love of the Word!

FOR THOUGHT: Figures of speech enrich language and understanding, but sometimes they discreetly hide knowledge that must be acquired through faith. Do you think this is what Jesus meant when he answered the disciples’ question in Matthew 13:12?

Just how would the people to whom Jesus spoke understand the truth of His parables?

BIBLE TERMS REQUIRE PROPER UNDERSTANDING AND DISCRIMINATE USAGE

“For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle? So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? for ye shall speak into the air.” I Corinthians 14:8-9.

“I think I know what you mean, but that is not what you said.” So goes the common misspeaking or misunderstanding of daily communications. Using the right term is important, especially in matters of the Word. One such instance is the often confusing the terms, “spirit” and “soul.” But, for present consideration are the Greek terms “GE” (earth) and “COSMOS” (world) as translated in the Bible.

The term “Ge” is very different in both appearance and meaning from “Cosmos.” Yet, no small number of folks continue to use the terms interchangeably. This leads to misunderstandings, and bad theology.

In the Bible, the word “world” is most often used as the translation of “cosmos.” This is proper, and when reference is made to the planet on which we live, the Greek term from which the reference is translated will be “Ge.” The ancient Greek word “cosmos” references a working system designed to produce predictable results. Hence the universe of planetary bodies is referred to as a cosmos as it is a definite, predictable working pattern. The order of the world of men is a cosmos because it is framed on the predictable order of sin and death. A clock is a cosmos since it is a working system designed to produce predictable results. Additionally, they call that stuff women use to make themselves pretty “cosmetics.” That, too, is from cosmos because it transforms a female from an ordinary human being to a predictable system designed to attract the opposite sex. In summation, “world” is from “Cosmos.” It designates a system. It is not a designation of the planet earth.

As mentioned, there is a term designating the planet. It is “Ge.” Furthermore, that root word in its expansion gives us such words as “geology, geography, geometry, geophysics, Georgia,” etc., all having to do with the physiology of the planet.

Being discriminatory with words goes a long way toward eliminating confusion of ideas. It helps the speaker to think more precisely, and the audience to infer more properly what exactly has been implied, connoted, or denoted. Most of us would profit from a review of etymology (a study of root words, prefixes and suffixes). It would most likely stoke our love for our mother tongue as well as open pleasurable avenues of ideas not previously, personally known.

Upon hearing this detailed explanation, a student was asked, “Now do you understand the difference between “earth” and “world?” To this he replied, “Gee!” Oh, NO!!

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think the theology of some Bible teachers would change if they took a moment to study the terms in this article?

How does this affect your thinking of the point from which Christ stood as a lamb slain?

Does this help you make more sense out of the offer of eternal life in the Tree of Life in Eden?

BLINDERS ON-BLINDERS OFF

There are seeing folks who are blind, and there are blind folks who see! Pity the former, for there are none so blind as those who will not see. Their kind is described well in Acts 28:27, *“For the heart of this people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them.”* A common tactic of Satan is to instill fear of the unknown in the hearts of men and induce them to blind their own eyes to spiritual reality.

Memories of childhood recall times when dad had a mule or two for plowing and other domestic chores. To get one of them to cross a creek on a very sturdy bridge was tricky. Most of the time success was achieved only when blinders were applied, and the animal coaxed to follow its leader. The green pastures just ahead were obscured by the possible pitfalls. How many animals have perished in barn fires because panic caused them to perceive the structure offered more safety than passing through it to the outside. In cases such as these, blinders were a good thing, designed to save their lives, but spiritual blinders applied to men are designed to destroy life.

Moreover, men are not animals, but one cannot overlook the obvious parallel here. Needed are spiritual and moral blinders to evil, and opened eyes to truth. After all, the human mind is only good when it is as an operating parachute: OPEN! It is not unusual to hear men who aspire to high places of judgment vow to keep an open mind on matters that come before them. God can speak to an open mind, but Satan wants a blinder on as many as possible: he succeeds too often.

Jesus addressed this problem in Revelation, Chapter Three. He enjoined the church at Laodicea, and the rest of us as well, to apply eye salve that they might see; namely, the Word of God. Disseminating the Word, then, is a practical application of eye salve that the Holy Spirit will use to instill true sight. It may be called salt, or light, or eye salve, but it is the precious Word that is light and life to those who walk in darkness. Furthermore, the church of the Lord Jesus Christ remains under the obligation of the Great Commission, and the joy of seeing spiritual things should be more than enough to induce Christians to open their storehouses of knowledge to others in need of what they know and have, even if it should be in the face of criticism and opposition.

Heaven's knowledge is true. The hope it instills is more valuable than all the world could ever offer. Uniquely, these things were procured, and are offered in and by the Lord Jesus, the Christ. The truly, good news to a sin-burdened world is that He may be had by faith. “I once was blind, but now I see!”

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think that fear of the unknown makes people reluctant to find the Lord and the life He offers?

Are any lifestyles of this world worth holding while rejecting the Lord?

What was the eye salve Jesus enjoined the church of Laodicea to secure from Him?

BURY THE TAIL AND DON'T WRING THE NOSE!

One of my former pastors and seminary professors, Paul Goodwin, was fond of telling a story about a fellow who was bitten by a mad dog. As the story goes, he killed the dog, then buried it — all but the tail. Now and then when he thought about the pain and suffering he had encountered by being bitten, he would pull the dog out of the ground, beat it with a shovel, then bury it again — all but the tail.

The story illustrates so many issues of life. Adverse things happen. Unfortunate words are spoken. Hurt is incurred. The natural human reaction is to retaliate in kind. It is the old legal “eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” mentality which the people of God operated on while under the childhood covenant of law.

It is indisputably clear in the great Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7, that Jesus upped the ante of the code of life under grace. Moreover, He did not provide a veil or excuse for one to hide behind, but squarely leveled the bar at the doorstep of every individual who would follow Him. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that what He taught about discipleship is embedded in writing hundreds of years prior to His personal ministry on earth.

Consider the words of the wise man, Solomon. *“Surely the churning of milk bringeth forth butter, and the wringing of the nose bringeth forth blood: so the forcing of wrath bringeth forth strife.”* Prov. 30:33. Again, *“Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out: so where there is no talebearer, the strife ceaseth. As coals are to burning coals, and wood to fire; so is a contentious man to kindle strife.”* Prov. 26:20-21. May I further illustrate?

If one has offended someone, it is not up to a third party to apologize for him, which they cannot do anyway, but many try (are they trying to play one-upmanship or present themselves more holy?) If past offenses have been assigned to the vaults of time, then they are as a dead or sleeping dog. Surely wisdom dictates that they should be let lie. The opening of old wounds cannot change history and can do little more than stir up strife. Such matters call for the application of wisdom which if any lacks, he should ask of God rather than forge ahead in the heat of human emotions. God’s precious Word fully equips His followers, and it provides the common sense both of burying the dog and the tail, too, plus refraining from wringing the nose. Thank the Lord for this wisdom. May we all be blessed with grace to follow it.

FOR THOUGHT: Do you know of someone who simply could not forgive and forget, so they had to beat a “dead dog” repeatedly? Have you ever done this?
At what point in such a scenario as this does wisdom kick in?
How do you see Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount making application to this principle?

C N GLOVER'S FAVORITE STORY

Dr. C. N. Glover, one of three founders of Missionary Baptist Seminary in Little Rock, was a Baptist preacher filled with stories; sometimes practical; sometimes funny; sometimes both. He has been in heaven for many years now, but in his later years, it was my joy to travel with him, and to deliver lectures to seminaries and institutes in the American Baptist Association. A trip of several hours was not long enough for him to run out of stories. I have heard him tell this one more than once and deemed it to be one of his all-time favorites.

"The Baptist preacher was after farmer Jim to come to church. Jim never would come because he said he had nothing appropriate to wear. So, one day the preacher went to town and bought a new suit, shirt, tie, and shoes, and delivered them to Jim. He told the farmer that he no longer had an excuse, so he wanted him to be in church next Sunday.

Well, Sunday came and went, and there was no Jim. Next day, the preacher went to the farmer's house and inquired as to why he did not come to church since he had new clothes and shoes. It was then that Jim told the preacher that he got all dressed up in those new clothes and when he looked in the mirror, he looked so distinguished that he just went on down to the Presbyterian Church!"

The story always drew considerable laughter, especially in the inimitable way Conrad Glover could tell it. But the moral of the story is clear. Disciples cannot be bought. If they do not respond to "Thus saith the Lord," the response will be meaningless. Kudos to the preacher for helping farmer Jim, but it is always better to appeal to men on the basis of the eternal Word of the Lord. A response to that would have motivated farmer Jim to come to church with new clothes or not! Abraham told the rich man in hell who was concerned about his brothers, "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead." Luke 16:31.

Is there some similar excuse keeping many of our families and friends from worship services today? If so, encourage them with the Word of the Lord. Their proper response will result in new clothes per Jesus' promise Matt 6:31-33, including white robes of righteousness!

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think disciples may be bought?

What power in one's life will enable faithful discipleship?

Should God's people respond to the need of others in material things?

What excuse is acceptable to keep one from serving God?

CASTING CROWNS NECESSITATES CROWNS TO CAST

"Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him."
James 1:12.

Much is made of the subject of crowns in the pages of Holy Writ. The Old Testament uses the term to depict literal, circular headwear as symbols of authority and royalty. But as is common to the Old Testament, these are also symbolic of greater things. They are shadows of New Testament realities, the fullness of which is mainly yet future. Think with me for a moment!

New Testament references to crowns for the faithful people of God include: a crown of life, Rev. 2: 10; a crown of glory, 1 Peter 5:4; a crown of rejoicing, 1 Thess. 2: 19; a crown of righteousness, 2 Tim. 4:8; an incorruptible crown, 1 Cor. 9:25. Of course, there is also the crown of thorns, unique to the Lord Jesus at His crucifixion.

Here is the idea that the scriptures set forth: The New Testament term for crown is in the Greek, "Stephanous," and it literally means "that which surrounds." The New Testament usage of the idea is an extension of what is presented in Proverbs 17:6, "Children's children are the crown of old men ... " Children are not presented as beanies or caps for the head, but as the source of joy of life. Thus, the basic idea, "that which surrounds" (Stephanous), says those who live their life in subjection to God, and the teaching of His Holy Word will realize acute awareness in later life, as well as in the ages to come, of being surrounded with the meaning and sweetness of those things, and they will remain throughout the ages.

But will we have golden headwear as a symbol of those things to cast at the Savior's feet? It is not clear in the scriptures that this will be the case. The twenty-four elders cast their crowns before the Throne of God, but this is understood to be symbolic of honoring God as the one who alone made it possible for these things to be reality. Such literal honor we will always attribute to our God, beanie or no beanie.

However, Jesus wore a literal crown of thorns. Those thorns mean more than what they alone inflicted. They symbolize that our Loving Savior was surrounded with excruciating pain and suffering, even more than what might come from the literal puncture wounds. This crown symbolizes the great cost of the crowns His people may know in time and eternity; a status of life to cast in great, eternal joy before the Throne of God's great love and grace.

But casting crowns necessitates crowns to cast. Are you being true to His love, grace, and doctrines which will in the process of time produce such crowns?

FOR THOUGHT: At this point in your life, what do you consider to be your crown, that is, your chief joy?

How do you think crowns of life are acquired?

Do you believe you may enjoy more than one crown both in time and eternity? Why do you believe this?

CHALLENGE OF THE MUSTARD SEED?

It is nothing short of staggering! Jesus said if one had faith as a grain of mustard seed, he could remove mountains. Matt. 17:20. Now think with me for a minute about this.

The tiny mustard seed slips through the fingers of a closed fist, yet it may make a tree-like plant. The possibility is simple: God so programmed it to do so. Were the tiny mustard seed blessed with a brain, it would surely object to the prospect.

Animated, the mustard seed might say, "Do not plant me in the ground. It is cold, dark and lonely there, and I would not be happy." It may also offer, "To expect me to produce a mighty plant is ridiculous." Furthermore, it might offer, "Even if I did sprout, the chances are too great that a flood or drought would kill me, and if that were not enough, the sod is too hard to break, and even if I did, someone would step on me and that would be the end of that."

I submit that the success of the mustard seed lies in its absence of a brain, so it simply does what God programmed it to do. One cannot escape the idea that if the tiny mustard seed succeeds in such a mighty, formidable task, what could the Christian do who is resigned to follow the will of God? Regardless of the "mountains" of potential opposition, he would accomplish mighty things!

Dwelling on the subject at hand reminds one of an old story. It seems a tavern was to be built in a town that had always been dry. Christians in that town opposed it and called for a prayer rally. They asked God to intervene in the proposal. The next day, lightning struck the tavern then under construction and it burned down. The tavern owner filed a lawsuit against the town churches, declaring them responsible for his loss. The churches hired a lawyer and denied all responsibility. Responding to this unique case, the judge declared that regardless of how the case comes out, it is evident that the tavern owner believes in prayer and the churches do not.

Ouch! That is close enough to home to hurt! Yet, it illustrates human reaction in contrast to mustard seed programming.

But is it possible to have faith as a grain of mustard seed? Readers should consider the faith of Job in agony; of Daniel in the lion's den; of the three Hebrew children in the fiery furnace; of the church praying for imprisoned Peter; of Prisoner Paul in cold, wet shipwreck. If that is not enough, some time should be spent meditating on the eleventh chapter of Hebrews.

The apostle Peter walked on water so long as his attention was on Jesus, but the sad reality of modern-day saints is that they are like those other disciples on the sea that night: they never get out of the boat. ". . . *If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.*"

FOR THOUGHT: How profound is the "faith" of a mustard seed! Do you know of anyone possessing such faith? Have you prayed for it? Do you believe such faith would allow men to demonstrate it at will, without spiritual cause? Do you believe God hears the prayers of His people?

CHILDREN OF PROMISE

The first two thousand years of human history might well be called “the age of experimentation.” Will mankind left largely to himself seek after God and His will for his life? The obvious answer was, and is, “No!” Thus, it was proven through the Noahic Flood, and the subsequent Tower of Babel that, though many were doubtlessly saved people spiritually, their way was corrupt. It was then that God moved to implement a specific covenant relationship with His people. Abraham is the beginning of that line. He received a covenant of promise that is still in effect to this day. Although predicated upon the spiritual salvation relationship with God, the covenant has to do with the life of obedience to God His people are to live.

The apostle Paul taught the church at Rome, and the churches of Galatia about this special standing with God in the following terms: *“That is, they which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed.”* Romans 9:8. *“Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise.”* Gal. 4:28. Some would apply these scriptures to all who have repentantly received the Lord Jesus as their personal Savior, yet walk after the world, or worse, after the heresies of Satan’s promotion. These have no advantage over the antediluvian population or those who busied themselves with the Tower of Babel. Furthermore, the loss of the true meaning of life on earth is just as sure to those of that mindset.

Let the reader consider that God would not have Ishmael for His heir, but the child of God’s promise, Isaac. A temporary covenant of Law was enacted upon the children of Isaac that they might learn the awfulness of sin, preparing them for the next and last stage of the covenant relationship, the Anointed One’s body, the New Testament Church, purchased with the lifeblood of the Son of God. It is a covenant that will remain to give glory to God throughout the age and the worlds to come. It is the final form of God’s covenant with man, preparing a people to rule and to reign with Jesus in the fast-approaching millennial reign.

Men have sought to offer to God forms of legalism as His inheritance. Others have despised their heritage and sold out for worldly exaltation or temporary gain as Esau of old, losing something that cannot be regained, but it is the true church saints that constitute those to whom the beloved apostle said, “Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise.” Here, then, is the sweet possession of God’s true people on earth. Let it be cherished and never abandoned!

FOR THOUGHT: Do you understand that the “Children of Promise” involves heirship beyond, but predicated upon, the “born from above” relationship with God?

Do you see that this means many, many more people are born from above, who never walk with God in covenant relationship? How much more important then, do you see His church as a part of your life?

Do you see that salvation of the spirit of man, and salvation of the mind-life, though definitely connected, are two separate things?

CHRISTIAN STEWARDSHIP

“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.” I Cor. 16:2.

What responsibility does a Christian have in the use of his money? This is an oft asked question, especially in lessons and discussions of stewardship. It is asked because there are tangential extremes that invariably get thrown into the verbal mix.

In Old Testament times, God demanded a tenth of one's increase, even the first fruits of man, beast, the fields, orchards, and vineyards. Wealth or lack thereof was not taken into consideration, except in the offerings in which the poor could offer birds instead of beasts.

Under the New Testament era of grace, God's people have not received less, but more responsibility, all within the realm of maturity rather than demand.

But modern times have produced their own extremities. On one hand, some would have us to always study to boycott companies that sell what we need when those companies then use their money wrongly. I do not accept that responsibility unless the evil is blatant. I cannot be responsible for what others do with their money. I have enough trouble governing my own decisions.

On the other hand, one should be aware of his responsibility to use money wisely. It is hard to claim that there is no money for God's work when one is spending God's money for alcohol, tobacco, gambling, and other vices that are a blight on society. Moreover, what does the widow who gave her last two mites to the work of God say to us? Anything???

Furthermore, it is not the church super-structural programs, but the local, New Testament churches that should be the object of our concern in wise stewardship. The apostolic instruction to the Corinthians is, *“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.”* After all, it is not the tele-evangelist; the cooperative programs; or self-styled religious programs that visit you in the hospital, conduct funerals, deliver God's messages in sermon, song, Bible study, and in property maintenance commensurate to worship services. It is the local church which provides these ministries. It is worthy of the support of all its members, maintaining it is giving to God and accepted as such. Personally, I am careful about how I spend my money, and more careful how and where I give it!

FOR THOUGHT: Since believers are to do more under grace than required to do under law, does this include how one uses money as well?

Do you think the phrase “upon the first day of the week” alludes to giving to the church, or might it mean setting it aside for all benevolent purposes such as church, alms, etc.?

Do you think there are many who see church gifts as the end of their responsibility monetarily, thereby abandoning personal responsibility in other important areas of Christian life?

CHRISTMAS IS OVER — SO WHAT?

“ . . . what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness,” 2 Peter 3:11.

Long before it was a federal holiday, Christmas was! There are few scholars who actually believe that Jesus was born in December, but that has been accepted by both religious and secular worlds as the day to celebrate His grand arrival in Bethlehem. Some two thousand years have passed since the angelic announcement to shepherds in the night-time fields, and what is the common experience of celebrating that monumental event? There is much din and noise; tinsel and lights; crazy shopping; much food preparation; exchanging of gifts to one another; even a much greater outpouring of thoughts and gifts of a charitable nature; Christmas music fills the air, and the season evokes much partying, gaiety, and the like. The season brings exhilaration to some, and despondency to others.

Hey! Wait a minute!

The world has never accepted the reason for the season, but God's people have. But do they get lost in all of the above busyness? Post reflections of the holiday just past bring not only amazement of the holiday itself, but also of the thoughtless, humanly religious acts that characterize it. Such makes it appropriate to ask, Christmas is over – so what? If the whole idea of it is half as meaningful as it should be, it should evoke deep commitments. It should evoke repentance from sin and a personal commitment of life without reservation to the Creator God who became a man to do for us what none of the species could possibly do: succeed as the second Adam, overcoming sin, death, hell and the grave for all who accept Him as their personal substitute on the cross.

The very idea of Christmas should evoke a lifestyle of humility and thanksgiving accompanied by a benevolent spirit toward others, not just at Christmas time, but all year long. It should evoke a life of prayerful dedication to the cause for which He came; to become a continuous disciple in learning and living the faith once delivered to the saints in the church He established.

Furthermore, Christmas should evoke a readiness to do all within our realm of possibilities to help to fulfill the terms of the Great Commission He gave His church, stated in Matthew 28:18-20. It should evoke the spirit of Christmas in the best of biblical terms in our life all year long, and not just for a brief season.

Finally, it should evoke a desire and commitment to take up one space in the pews of worship every time the church meets to worship and thereby honor the Christ of Christmas. It should evoke an up-look in precious hope for His next soon appearance on this earth!

FOR THOUGHT: A lot has been written here about Christmas. What does it mean to you?

Do you think the Bible presentation of the birth of Jesus and the modern celebrations of Christmas have much in common?

If one may focus on the birth of Jesus, then carry on without change, has it profited him at all?

CHURCH DISCIPLINE IS WHAT?

Words! They are our greatest means of communication, but they are often problematic. Words may mean one thing to a speaker or writer, and another thing to the hearer or reader. One may not properly infer what another has implied because often words leave out more than they contain. Add to that a language that allows the same thing to be worded a half dozen different ways, and the problem of misunderstanding is greatly increased. Job 36:10 records, *“He openeth also their ear to discipline, and commandeth that they return from iniquity.”* Now, consider the subject of church discipline as an example.

To the average churchgoer, church discipline means something harsh and drastic. It may be phrased as ex-communication; exclusion; defrocking (in the case of clergy), etc. It is generally understood as an action which includes a charge of offense; a failure on the part of the one charged to rectify that action; then an action taken to sever the active membership or privileges of the one so charged. Let's think more about this.

What is discipline? It is channeling behavior into the restrictions and benefits of a specified field of endeavor or way of life. Educational subjects are referred to as disciplines. Math is a discipline; science is a discipline, language is a discipline, etc. The object of those disciplines is to channel the thinking and understanding of a student into the unique laws of each to become a master of it. Hence, one disciplines himself to the unbending laws of addition, subtraction, etc. which are unerringly true. The arts are different, but each still has its uniqueness that demands discipline on behalf of the student; hence, the discipline of language, history, medicine, etc. A student of any discipline may be referred to as a disciple of that discipline. The early followers of Jesus were known as His disciples.

So, is a New Testament church a discipline? Indeed, it is! It is the pillar and ground of the truth; the faith once delivered to the saints. Saved people are admitted to membership in a church through the door of baptism. The ensuing fellowship in said church is likened more as a barracks where warriors are trained than as a hospital for sick saints.

So, rather than thinking of church discipline as punitive, it should be thought of as the restricting and benefiting doctrines of truth, and the general behavior of the membership as being in agreement with that truth. The true teachings of the New Testament are both positive and negative. The disciple is to learn, believe, and follow the positive teachings, while refraining from the negatives of sin, evil, and general wrongdoing.

Church actions of discipline must always be an affirmation (holding the line) of Bible teachings with a view of solidifying all of the membership within its restrictions and benefits. Consequently, a church action normally thought of as church discipline is really the church affirming its discipline, and its own discipleship in that discipline. Should there be offending, non-repenting parties to that discipline, the action of withdrawal from such parties is in order, only when restoration efforts fail. Such is punitive, but must also be enacted with a mournful heart, and prayerful hope of restoration of the offending parties to the New Testament discipline of the church.

FOR THOUGHT: Should not church discipline be thought of as a church disciplining itself by means of submitting itself to the constraints of specific New Testament teachings? If so, what should severing the membership of rebellious members be called? Have you ever witnessed or been a part of a church exercising discipline upon unrepentant, wayward members? What did you think then? What do you think now?

CHURCH DISCIPLINE IS WHAT?? (Part 2 of 2)

So, rather than thinking of church discipline as punitive, it should be thought of as the restricting and benefiting doctrines of truth, and the general behavior of the membership as being in agreement with that truth. The true teachings of the New Testament are both positive and negative. The disciple is to learn, believe, and follow the positive teachings while refraining from the negatives of sin, evil, and general wrongdoing. Church actions of discipline must always be an affirmation (holding the line) of Bible teachings with a view of solidifying all of the membership within its restrictions and benefits. Consequently, a church action normally thought of as church discipline is really the church affirming its discipline and its own discipleship in that discipline. Should there be offending, non-repenting parties to that discipline, the action of withdrawal from such parties is in order, only when restoration efforts fail. Such is punitive, but must also be enacted with a mournful heart, and prayerful hope of restoration of the offending parties to the New Testament discipline of the church.

There is no room for a holier-than-thou attitude in such action, nor of hot-headed, judgmental attitudes. Offending members of a church should be prayed for, visited, pleaded with to correct their ways into the discipline to which they agreed when becoming a member of the church. In short, if one is puffed up as were the Corinthians (I Cor. 5) over an incestuous affair among their members, they are not showing the maturity so necessary to corrective behavior. Mourning and prayer that one is straying from the blessed teachings that make a New Testament church precious is always the correct procedure. And, if punitive action is taken, it is not over! Petitions to God's throne of grace are to continue that He might bring the offending disciple(s) to repentance and restoration of membership with all of its responsibilities and privileges.

In the realization that there has no temptation taken anyone, but such as is common to man, those who are spiritual enough to bring gentle, but undiluted restoration to an offending party, must seriously consider themselves, lest they also be tempted.

One may consider if it is worth it since there are so many potential pitfalls. That thought is straight from the mind of man, and not of God. He teaches His church how to maintain behavior and to discipline itself to His teachings. To fail to do so would soon bring the demise of a New Testament church, as well as individual and corporate judgment from the Lord.

In 1964, an older soldier of the Cross, Dr. Chester Tulga, of the Conservative Baptist Association, addressed the church messengers at the meeting of the American Baptist Association in Chicago, Illinois. Among his many statements of wisdom, he cautioned the preachers about their dream of building a large church. He said that inevitably, a large church loses its power of discipline. When a church can no longer discipline itself to the New Testament, it is only a short time until it is no longer a true church, but a religious society devoid of the Spirit of God. Such is the fundamental importance of a New Testament church disciplining itself to the discipline known as the New Testament of our Lord and Savior, Jesus, the Christ.

FOR THOUGHT: A church that finds itself desperately needing to exercise discipline on an offending member should have an attitude of 1) indignance, 2) outright anger, or 3) sorrow and prayer?

Why do you think larger churches lose their power of disciplining themselves?

CHURCH PLANTING BY DECEPTION?

Romans 12:17b teaches God's people to *"provide things honest in the sight of all men."* Surely, it is unseemly to think of God's people doing anything other than just that. Yet, the procedures of some who profess to be the Lord's ministers appear to be less than honest. Let me explain.

A number of years ago I visited the Washington Cathedral in our nation's capital. It was an impressive structure with large, high rooms and halls that echoed sounds, and beautiful, artistic, stained glass windows, ornate woodwork and furnishings featuring a huge pipe organ. By asking repeatedly what denomination it belonged to, I was finally told in an air of annoyance that it was Episcopal, but that anyone was welcome to worship there. I did not doubt their hospitality, but now, at least I knew the theological spin that would emanate from its pulpit. Why was there a reluctance to be forthright about its affiliation when one would think they should have been as proud of that as they were the magnificent structure? Could it be that they perceived that the "nastiness" of doctrine, wherever advertised, separates people rather than bringing them together?

In recent years such has become a creeping trend in Baptist ranks as well. Preference is given to "Community Church" or some other neutral label under the pretense that "Baptist" references doctrine that turns people off. Proponents of such actions say they do not change their doctrinal views, and if one identifies himself as a Baptist to them, they will be quick to tell you how many Baptist people they have, and that they preach Baptist doctrine. Frankly, this writer has a hard time swallowing that. It seems some ministers are determined to build a little kingdom by deception and must believe that God will somehow bend the rules to approve their hard work. How can it be that folks can be wooed into a church of the non-denominational denomination, then have it sprung on them later that it is a Baptist church? Will God bless things that are not honest in the sight of all men?

Baptist churches have a glorious heritage and a legacy that is perpetuated from the first church Jesus started in Galilee some 2,000 years ago. It has sailed through bloody seas and horrible persecutions rather than recant who and what they were. What is the thinking, if it is thinking, that would motivate someone to deny all that, and still expect to have the commendation of the Master and the fellowship of the martyrs??? It seems some have forgotten that *"Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain."* Psalm 127:1.

FOR THOUGHT: What is one to make of churches resorting to attractive wording to conceal their doctrinal identity?

If this is done in close proximity to other churches, known by time honored name, holding to the same doctrines, is it not a signal of division?

Do you have confidence in a church planted by a man or would you rather be in a church God planted using His men? Explain?

Do you agree with the Bible that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Why? Why not?

CLERGY/LAITY NOT OF HOLY WRIT!

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Matthew 7:21.

In centuries past, some denominations began to reference church members in the extra-scriptural categories of clergy and laity. No such distinction is made in the New Testament. In fact, Jesus warned against such as it emulates the world in an authority structure. Matt. 20:26. But some will insist that they are lay members and think it strange such terms are not well received. One preacher readily agreed with the distinction, stating many members in his church were lay members: some lay here; some lay there, but mostly lay out.

On a more serious note, such distinctions have wrongly divided responsibilities. Folks in the pew believe being an inactive spectator is their rightful part in church activity (or inactivity). They think they are to leave the dissemination of the Word to the trained minister. Consequently, the average church member may show up at worship time, sometimes; sing with the congregation, put an offering in the plate, sit dutifully while the preacher presents his well-studied homily, then leave with an almost broken arm from patting himself on the back for being such a good Christian, perhaps uttering an occasional complaint because the preacher is attracting too few people.

Hummmm! This may be a little harsh, but I am certain that the Great Commission, Matthew 28:18-20, was not given to ministers, but to the church. Moreover, one cannot divorce a church from its membership; therefore, it is the responsibility of every member of the church to busy himself, according to his talents. Forget clergy/laity, the church is one. Every believer should awaken to the thrill of understanding Bible truth, and the joy of bringing others into the kingdom.

Biblically presented unity of the church does not include a church house! It does emphasize a living organism that Jesus is pleased to call His body. As a body, every member has specific duties in exalting the Head. This underscores something that too often appears to be missing—the personal, intimate, ongoing, living relationship of every member with the Head. It has been said, and I heartily concur, that the Lord’s church is not something one attends, rather it is a living body of which each bona fide member is an intricate part of on a twenty-four hour/seven-days per week basis!

Real Christians are true Bible teachers,
Long hours they give,
That lost souls might live,
Theirs is the playing field-- not the bleachers!

William A. Dillard

FOR THOUGHT: What did Jesus say one should do if he is to be considered great among the disciples?

Is there a bible injunction against calling any man “Father” spiritually?

What is your understanding of “Clergy?” “Layman?”

CONCEIVING COVENANT COST

Sanctification is a big word, and it has a big meaning. It denotes the setting aside of a person, place or thing for a specified purpose. Religiously, it denotes the holiness or state of being set aside or apart for the honor and glory of God. But how is that practically accomplished? Let's think about it!

Since man is a threefold creature in the similitude of the Godhead, and since sin invaded all aspects of man's being, it remains that if anyone is saved, such salvation must address all three components of lost man's being. The spirit of man is saved and sealed in the "born from above" process of repentance from sin and trust in Christ Jesus as personal Savior. The mind is then being saved in learned discipleship. The body will not and cannot be saved until the resurrection and/or rapture. So, from the point of spiritual salvation to the grave, the quest is for the salvation of the mind-life through transformation wrought by the ingested Word. This Word is the covenant or contract God has made with mankind, which is ultimately expressed in this world as a true, New Testament church. That covenant comes with a tremendous price tag: the blood of the Son of God!

Modern times are now dominated by those who treat the tremendous covenant flippantly. The end of such action, though written, has yet to become reality. Thus does the writer of Hebrews speak in terms both stern and plain, *"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."* Heb. 10:28-31.

Saved, New Testament church members are sanctified by a covenant procured by the blood of the Son of God. To turn from it and/or to treat it flippantly is to incur the judgment of God, and to insure certain loss. It is worse than the punishment that fell on those who despised Moses' law. Christians awake! Realize what you have by being sanctified by the blood of the covenant! Cherish it! Live it! Love it! Honor it! It is holy, and its benefits are and may continue to be yours! The other path of life is simply too unthinkable!

FOR THOUGHT: When is the last time you heard it explained that men are threefold, lost in all three aspects of being, and must therefore be saved in each of those three?

Do you believe Hebrews 10:28-31 is directed to saved people of God? How then shall Christians who are flippant about faith fare at the Judgment Seat of Christ?

CONTENDING WITH THE DEVIL

The apostle Paul taught us by his instructions to the church at Ephesus, *“For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.”* However true this is, such wrestling may often lead directly to ill effects on one’s flesh and blood. Throughout history, God’s people have dealt with the devil, of necessity, and just to recall a few of those precious incidents brings renewed appreciation of the grace of God by which alone victory was won.

To be sure, Abel paid with his life for standing up for God’s instructions about what is right. Noah learned what starting all over again on earth was all about. Abraham forfeited country and kin looking for a city not made with hands, which he found. Joseph knew the pains of rejection and imprisonment. Moses forfeited the treasures of Egypt and had to flee for his life. Elijah knew what it was to be on the government’s most wanted list. Micaiah had to face in opposition, 400 false prophets, be assaulted and imprisoned. Jeremiah was cast into a mud pit. The three Hebrew children were cast into a fiery furnace, and Daniel into the lion’s den. There is more, so very much more! Stephen was stoned to death, James slain with the sword, Peter imprisoned, Paul and Silas were beaten with many stripes and cast into prison when casting a demon out of a woman in Philippi. Later, Paul was stoned and thrown into a ditch in Derbe and Lystra.

The great Hall of Faith chapter, (Hebrews 11) concludes by mentioning so many others who were *“. . . stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.”* He then goes on to chide and to encourage us all by reminding us, *“Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.”* 12:4.

Easy religion is not God’s way. His is the narrow path; the strait gate, and all who live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. Jesus did not come to bring peace, but a sword, setting family members against one another, and a person’s chief enemy is too often those of his own household. Satan knows how to fight, and the Christian must be wise in dueling with him. Jude gave us the example of the archangel debating the devil over the body of Moses and stated that even he would not bring a railing accusation against him but rebuked him in the name of the Lord. Jude 1:9. So, the bottom line is still true: *“ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.”* James 4:7.

FOR THOUGHT: What chance does a mortal outside of Christ have to resist the supernatural power of the devil?

What chance does a Christian have to resist the devil?

Has not God in the flesh (Jesus) met him head-on and defeated him?

If He that is within the believer is greater than he that is in the world, why do you think so many Christians fail in spiritual battle?

CONTRADICTIONS? YES? NO?

There are times when one may wonder if Holy Writ supports a contradiction. Here is what is meant. Hebrews 10:26-27 states, *“For if we sin willfully 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.* Then, one may read in I John 1:9, *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”*

A student once asked, “Which way is it? If confession is made and sins are forgiven, then why is it said there is no more sacrifice for sin, but a fearful looking for judgment as a result of sins committed?” It may be rightly assumed that quite a number of people wonder the same thing. The writer of Hebrews speaks of a willful turning away from the truth of the faith once delivered to the saints to follow another path. If such a one understands the New Testament plan of living for the Lord and willfully rejects it, then what is it that would bring him back to it? There is no plan “B.” Those, so erring, will follow a path of iniquity which shall be devoured at the Judgment Seat of Christ. The Lord will not reward disobedience.

However, what the Apostle John points out is that all of us in our discipleship journey have to deal with sin. Such is not a rejection of the teaching of the Lord, but moral slips, unbecoming speech, disrespect for others, sins of omission as well as commission that should be repented of daily. In such cases, the Lord is always ready to forgive and to heal His dear children. On this basis, the true Christian will walk in the light as He is in the light and know all the wonderful benefits of life mentioned in I John 1:7.

Is there a contradiction in the Word? Absolutely not, far from it. Trust it fully and know the peace it brings!

FOR THOUGHT: Name some of the common sins Christians commit. Do you believe these should be repented of on a daily basis?

If they are not repented of, what will happen when the believer stands before Jesus?

Do you understand the absence of contradiction between Hebrews 10: 26-27 and John 1:9?

Could you help others to understand this?

CRYBABY LOSERS ON RECKONING DAY

In the world of Christian discipleship there are as many classes of folks as there are fruit producers in the parable of the seed and the sower, Matthew 13:2-8. The lifestyle of these folks parallel the seed effects falling on the wayside, in stony ground, among thorns, and in fertile soil. The latter ones are blessed beyond imagination whether they fit into the thirty, sixty, or hundredfold producers. The former categories forecast the sad state of those who choose another way of life than that which is produced by the nourished seed of faith. In attempts of self-justification, they may point to failure to understand, and blame the forces of evil (birds) for snatching away their opportunity to understand wondrous truths. But the inescapable truth is that it was they who refused to open their heart and mind to the Bible. Then there are those whose lives reflect no depth of root and are scorched by the pressures of a sinful world.

Finally, there are those who will not properly deal with the social concerns, financial opportunities and other pressures of life promoted by the flesh, and who, as a result, miserably fail in discipleship. It just seems easier to give in to the world than do the proverbial paddling upstream of Christian discipline. Such as these do have a long lineage; a primary example of which is ancient Esau. To Esau, the things that could be his in the future paled in comparison to what he could have in the present, even if it was just a bowl of soup. He was hungry! So, why worry about pie in the sky when there is steak on the ground? Esau thus lost his birthright: a double portion of his father's goods. He also lost out in the blessings of life that patriarchs were empowered to confer on their offspring. Upon realization of his miserable failure, Esau, saddened and enraged, lamented much, but to no avail. Crybaby projections are so unflattering and useless in foolish adults!

So, let all be warned. The scriptures do not say what they say in vain. The writer of Hebrews states quite forcefully that churches should be aware of the spiritual condition of their members to ensure their spiritual well-being. He said we should look diligently, *"Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears."* Hebrews 12:17.

Some may be repulsed by this in the belief that reward is not to be gained or lost, but such an idea is foreign, even opposed to the scriptures. The Judgment Seat of Christ is for Christians, I Cor. 3:9-15. John's admonition to avoid loss is to God's people. 2 John 1:8. Let us not live so as to be Crybaby Losers on Reckoning Day! Judging the present state of "Christianity," by standards of the Word, there will be plenty of them.

FOR THOUGHT: What, in your own words, is a crybaby loser on reckoning day? Who is the crybaby? What is the reckoning day?
How many Biblical crybabies can you identify that are recorded in the Bible?
What may a Christian do to avoid becoming a spiritual crybaby?

CULTURAL CHRISTIANS

“And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?” Luke 6:46.

The President of the United States of America boldly stated in international media that the United States is not a “Christian country!” To a generation largely ignorant of history, he lauded the (unfounded) contributions to our advancement by Muslim nations. There is outcry, but not loud, and not long. As national foundations are made to crumble, one may still hear fainted laments, “But we are a Christian nation!” I submit to readers that while this great nation was founded on the Judeo-Christian teaching of Holy Writ, the definition of “Christian” by that holy book does not agree with the common, modern understanding of the word. This reality overwhelmingly reveals that “Christian” nowadays more pointedly means “Cultural Christian.” Think about it!

Churches of all types, brands, and contradictory doctrinal standing are accepted as “Christian” because they purport to hold to the historical fact that a man named Jesus came as the Son of God into the world and was crucified on a Roman Cross. That certainly is a true historical and biblical fact but accepting that alone does not qualify a person or an institution to be a Christian, except in the cultural sense.

Cultural Christians believe without question that any church is Christian simply because it purports to be. Folks do whatever is necessary to be added to the membership rolls of the “church of their choice,” but care little about learning what it teaches or where it came from, let alone what Holy Writ declares. Attendance is largely limited to AME (Armistice Day, Mother’s Day, and Easter) attendees which qualifies them to boldly make their spurious claim. Cultural Christians find that such membership allows them to inflate claims of contributions for tax advantages. Moreover, it insulates them from the outreach of more evangelical disciples and gives them a false sense of security that they could not be in error due to the large numbers of educated people who have made similar decisions. Additionally, it affords them social, business, and recreational interaction at minimal costs.

Nowadays, humor may be extracted from the inability of young and old alike on the street being unable to answer important questions in civics, but let’s hope the questions do not turn to the Bible. Such would be disastrous, which, of course, it will be, when cultural Christianity is offered to the Master as being the real thing!

FOR THOUGHT: How would you define the difference between a Bible believing Christian and a cultural Christian? Which kind do you see mostly in your world?

If people enjoy being a culture Christian rather than a strict Bible believing Christian, what harm could it possibly bring to them? Explain!

CUT OFF YOUR HAND, PLUCK OUT YOUR EYE!

“And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.”
Matt. 5:29-30.

The idea and terms found in the verses above are also found in at least two other places in the gospels. They are deeply troubling and perplexing to some readers, and a real problem to those who adamantly insist on a literal interpretation of the Bible to the exclusion of all figures of speech.

Let it be settled that it is imperative for context to be strictly adhered to in proper interpretation of any written document, but especially of the Bible. The context of the Sermon on the Mount spoken by Jesus in Matthew chapters five through seven is clearly shown to be a church message. Matt. 5:1. It emphasizes the contrast of life under the Law of Moses with the New Testament Church Age of grace. It must be received and understood in that context. So, how does that help explain this?

An eye, foot, or hand of any human body is totally controlled by the brain. It is true that should the offending extremity be excised, it could no longer offend, but the brain would still be offending through the other extremities. So, it would seem logical that one should then just remove his head and that would stop the offense. But Jesus is saying that such removal as he teaches would allow that body to live and not be destroyed. It should also be observed that there are extremely few people in today's churches with one eye, hand, foot, etc. because those body members are removed due to offense. Maybe folks have gotten so good that they do not offend with their body members anymore, but then that is obviously not the case. Truly, some other type of body is under consideration.

In I Corinthians 12, Paul speaks of the church as the body of Christ, a body of many members: some as hands, feet, eyes, etc. So, since this is a church sermon, it is believed that Jesus is saying to His church body that they must, as a last resort, excise an offending member or else become guilty of acquiescent approval of such offense, thus destroying the entire body as a spiritual institution. In other words, church discipline is important!

Additionally, the “hell” referred to in these verses is a translation of the Greek, “Gehenna.” It literally names the city dump of Jerusalem where things of no intrinsic value were discarded. Here, it references a lost and un-rewarded life, which is to be discarded and burned at the judgment seat of Christ at His coming, wherein some will be saved, yet so as by fire. Note I Cor. 3:9-15. Does this elevate the value of Christian living in the body of Christ to you?

FOR THOUGHT: How could an offending body member destroy the entire body? Is such a possibility a new concept, unheard of before? Name some possible cases. Symbolically, in the spiritual world, a body member that will not be subject to the head (Jesus) destroys the body unless excised from it. Have you personally known of a church body exercising this sort of discipline? What did you think?

CUTTING THE CRUD!

"They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one." Romans 3:12.

Time, in conjunction with the second law of thermodynamics, (all things degenerate) creates a need for chemical help. Equipment, driveways, building exteriors, etc. all too soon sport a collection of what is commonly called crud. To meet the need, a chemical company produces and markets a product called "Crud Cutter." Properly applied, crud is removed, and things look clean and usable again. So, what does this have to do with spiritual things? Much! Think with me!

Satan, the fallen angel Lucifer, is a master crud applicator. The minds and hearts of men that are intended to honor and glorify God are, by his influence, turned inwardly to self, and to layer after layer of spiritual misinformation which can be described, among other things, as spiritual crud.

In blatant opposition to the Word, Satan brushes on the idea that there is some inherent good in all men. Bible truth cleans that crud presenting the stark reality that all have sinned, and there is none that doeth good, no, not one! Rom. 3:23, 3:12.

Another layer of crud is that if one's good works outweigh his bad works, he will by that determination be saved. The crud cleaner of the Word underscores salvation is by faith and not by works. Eph. 2:8-10.

More crud comes in the layer of salvation maintenance: live it or lose it. But the application of the Word leaves no place for that bit of misinformation. The plain truth shines through magnificently. The only salvation of the spirit of man is an everlasting salvation; hence, eternal, or everlasting life. John 3:16. God gives no other.

It does not stop here. Pick a subject of spiritual things and leave the Crud Cutter (the Word) on the shelf, and crud will reign as surely as it does in time on material things.

What then is the foundational truth that one must find beneath all the crud? It is a discernment of origin and destiny. The origin of the body of human beings is dust. In Genesis 3:19 God told Adam, "... for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." But the spirit of man that finds expression through the body is from a different origin to which it is to return. Expanding a little on that, Solomon wrote, *"Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God Who gave it."* Ecc. 12:7. In finality, He is the judge of all men. He will not be avoided by a single one. So, the crud cutter of the Word allows all to know how to experience terrestrial life successfully with all its attendant, eternal reward. What a never-failing crud cutter is the Word. Thus, then, did Solomon say, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man." Ecc. 12:13.

Goodbye crud!

FOR THOUGHT: What are some of the ways worldliness, even religious activity and doctrine may be considered spiritual crud?

What are the destinations of the body and the spirit? If this is true of every person, who then may be considered wise who does not properly deal with his spiritual condition?

DEATH IN THE POT

Elisha was a mighty prophet of God in ancient Israel, the successor of Elijah, and a worker of miracles among the people of his time. Some of his mighty works are recorded in 2 Kings 4. A dearth prevailed in Gilgal (rolling hill country) when Elijah visited the sons of the prophets there. At his command, a huge pot was prepared for pottage, sufficient to feed all the people. One of the food preparation workers went into the field to gather herbs and found a wild vine from which he gathered many gourds and shredded them into the pot. When served, the people could not eat the pottage. The gourds were poisonous and doubtless very bitter. They cried out that there was death in the pot. Elisha commanded that meal be cast into the pot then the pottage served. And so it was that the food was good, and all the people ate with no harm.

What a wonderful story! It finds ready application for men in every generation, and underscores information for every disciple. In a world of sin and degradation, there is almost always a spiritual dearth. Too many times, what is gathered to satisfy spiritual hunger is nothing more than certain death, because it is not of God, but of man, or worse, from Satan's recipe book. It may look, sound, and be offered as good, but in spiritual affairs nothing is good but that which comes from God. That which is unknown and wild is not to be trusted as a remedy and guide to satisfy spiritual hunger and to nourish disciples.

Therefore, Elijah ordered that meal (flour) be added to the pot, and then served to the people. It was then that they found no harm at all in the pottage. Flour is the substance of bread. Jesus said, "I am that bread of life," John 6:48. One may eat of the bread that Jesus gives, and find his hunger satisfied. In fact, He stated that those who do not eat of that bread of life have no part with Him. Unarguably, there is death in the pottage of this world, but Jesus, the bread of life, negates the effects of sin and of death by His own eternal righteousness imparted to all those who hear Him and follow His directions.

Surely, the tables of the world are laden for many banquets, but there is death in the pot. On the other hand, there is a banquet provided by the Lord Jesus that a man may eat thereof and live forever. Whose table are you feeding from? Are you confident that yours is a banquet of life, or is it a banquet of death, from the delicacies of the devil?

Jesus said, "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness for they shall be filled." Matt. 5:6. David said, "O taste and see that the LORD is good: Blessed is the man that trusteth in him." Psalm 34:8. At the Lord's banquet there is no death in the pot, only life, and that everlasting!

FOR THOUGHT: What specific spiritual points do you get after reading 2 Kings 4? Does the parallel between earthly pottage and spiritual food seem obvious to you? Why? Think about and list some reasons why worldly pottage is attractive to people.

DEBUNKING UNIVERSALIST INTERPRETATION OF I COR. 12

Since the days of the apostles, the Lord's New Testament Churches have understood a church is local, congregational in government, and having two offices: pastor and deacon, to aid it in carrying out the terms of the Great Commission. Matt. 28:18-20.

When severe and extended persecution was used as the excuse of some of the Lord's churches to abandon Him, and to marry the Roman Empire, they assumed the notion of a universal, visible church. Eventually, they created the Roman Catholic Church, from which came Eastern Orthodox churches, and later the Protestant churches. Initially, those churches which were Catholic, but severed from Rome, all believed and propagated the Universal Visible Church doctrine. That became a huge problem to newly formed Protestants, who realized they were now without authority to exercise the holy sacraments. In that environment, the Universal Invisible Church doctrine was born. It taught that baptism was not really important, certainly not a door to church membership, but that all who trusted in Christ became members in that moment, and by that action, become a member of the Universal Invisible Church.

Next, came the problem of finding support scriptures for such a teaching. They leaned heavily on I Cor. 12:13, *"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."*

The cunningness of the devil is still as sharp as it was in the Garden of Eden. What is this verse saying? The word "Spirit" is translated as "the third part of the Godhead," "the wind," as per John 3, and "attitude". The word is not capitalized in ancient manuscripts leaving context (as mostly always) the determining factor.

This verse is NOT supporting any notion of a universal, invisible church. Rather it speaks of the unity of a local body (as here, at Corinth) which is made possible by the great goodness and grace of God. Read then the term "Spirit" as "Attitude" or "state of mind." Those who come to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. Hence, the universal attitude of a born-again person is one of submission to the God who saved him. It is in that spirit or attitude that we are buried in water into the local body and rejoice to drink deeply of the marvelous truth taught by the abiding Spirit of God upon that local body of believers. One only needs to consider the rest of the chapter to see this position fully supported by Holy Writ, especially the meaning of verses 25-27.

Let us all be reminded that the obscuring of truth is still the biggest tool of Satan.

FOR THOUGHT: What is the difference between Universal Visible Church and Universal Invisible Church doctrines? Are either of these to be found in the Bible? Where?

The Bible does not contradict itself. If Jesus started a local, visible assembly, how can there be any other kind found in the scriptures? Where did such come from then?

DISCIPLES CANNOT BE BOUGHT BUT LEECHES ARE A DIME A DOZEN

“He answered and said unto them, Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.” Mark 7:6.

The actions of the Pharisees say much to the keen observer, as does the superficial friends in the parable of the prodigal. Think about it!

Many years ago, there were a number of colorful personalities in the American Baptist Association who would not hesitate to speak up, should that be warranted. For a number of years, the churches would be advised that there were X number of churches and missions on particular foreign fields which wanted to affiliate with the ABA. It was soon learned, however, that this was a ploy mainly to secure salaries and building funds from whomever would take them in, by men with unchanged hearts. When those funds were deemed insufficient, they were off, seeking another group to take them in. Churches soon learned that mission work cannot be bought, but leeches were a dime a dozen.

In Oklahoma, a group which had been founded and supported by a northern convention sent messengers to the Baptist General Assembly of Oklahoma seeking admission to the association. Of course, that made a lot of folks happy until the bottom line was revealed of how much money they needed if they were accepted. One of the colorful personalities that was initially made happy was disabled. He used crutches to move about. When something was not right, he would tap the floor often and hard with those crutches, and the observer knew he was about to speak in opposition to whatever was under discussion. At the referenced meeting, his joy turned to disdain as the dollar figure became an issue of fellowship. He was then heard to repeat, “Speckled bird; speckled bird!”

But history repeats itself so much, and often in slight variations. Today’s churches run hard after the world in efforts to fill the pews and coffers, not to mention bragging rights of how successful they are. But with a spiritually unqualified congregation, and the problems Satan is sure to inject, decisions are made that plunge once bride-qualified churches ever deeper into the throes of religious, social club philosophy. After all, they reason, one must get along no matter what principle or doctrine is to be abandoned. Someday there will be an awakening, a terrible awakening to the fact that disciples cannot be bought, but leeches are a dime a dozen!

FOR THOUGHT: Sometimes reality is far from pleasant. It is hard to think of some missionaries as being “professionally” that, moving about and aligning with whomever provides the most financial support. Have you ever encountered such a scenario at this? What did you think at the time? What do you think now?

Do you believe that the work of God must be carried out by honest believers whose bottom line is not a compensation package? Why? Why not?

DISCIPLESHIP: DUMBING DOWN OR WISING UP

A common castigation of educational processes in public schools is that of “dumbing down” the students when the challenges of modern times obviously call for wising up. By some accounts, the castigation appears to be true. One illustration of this is widespread inability to function in the real world. For instance, I am a tall individual who is often asked, “How tall are you?” My reply is “I am three foot, forty.” Almost all of the time I follow up (of necessity), “I am four-foot twenty-eight.” Still getting a blank look, I offer, “Actually, I am five-foot, sixteen.” Youngsters for the most part simply do not get it, and I have had business people say, “Please stop it. I cannot do the math.” What???? My family is a family of teachers. At least one of them was forthrightly told by her principal, “You will not teach algorithms in this school. Please stop teaching the times-table.” What???? A youngster’s report of a measurement to me was “23 inches and five marks.” What??? Fractions, their names and meaning are unknown! What??? On and on it goes, ad nauseam.

Obviously, modern days do not the millennium make, but technology has produced fantastic opportunities for Christian education and sharing. Study and research has never been easier or more accessible, but the benefit of those things remains a reality only for those who are spiritually prepared to appreciate them and to use them. In recent years, because of the abundance of materials available, this writer gave away most of his library, keeping only those rare and treasured works that are mostly irreplaceable. At the same time, he expanded his research capability and accessibility many times over online. Likewise, one would think that all those who take the name of the Lord in any degree of reverence would quickly excel in spiritual knowledge and ability. But such thinking would be wrong. Technology is wonderful, but it is no substitute for a personal relationship and fellowship with God.

Most within the umbrella name of Christianity are not wising up. They are dumbing down! Their excitement is in material things that fulfill their social desires, and in the acumen of leaders who frame their homilies psychologically to scratch itching ears. Spiritual blessings are equated to the number of people socially attracted, size of property, and/or financial flow; criteria that would elevate most non-Christian sects to the highest of “spiritual blessings.” “Who caused the walls of Jericho to fall down flat?” asked a Sunday school teacher, only to recoil in horror that several in her class disavowed anything to do with it, some offering alibis.

The time remaining until all will meet our maker; every tongue confessing, and every knee bowing is extremely short. It is not a time to dumb down, but a time to wise up!

FOR THOUGHT: Conservative, Bible teaching churches bemoan the abandonment of strict Bible preachments by a larger number of churches. Why do you think this is happening? Do you see a correlation between educational dumbing down in schools and abandonment of spiritual teaching among churches more highly favoring social issues? Do you think the church is supposed to evolve into a social club or hold fast the teaching of Jesus whom it purports to be Lord? Why?

DISCRIMINATION IN PRAYER SOLICITATIONS

The psalmist penned the most interesting words in Psalm 66:18. *“If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.”* Why is this so interesting? Think with me for a moment!

The effect connoted in the verse is the refusal of the Lord to hear a plea, prayer, or other appellation of worship. The cause of that effect is the petitioner’s regard for iniquity in his heart. Now most will quickly identify iniquity as wrongdoing, but it is one of many discriminating terms designating wrongdoing such as “transgression,” “trespass,” “sin,” and “iniquity.” Each of these terms has specific, unique meanings in addition to the general theme of wrongdoing. In this verse, “iniquity” was chosen specifically to convey what would cause prayers to go unheard. It is lawlessness or disregard for God’s Word (law) in favor of what one wishes to do or believe. In the world of religion, many have minds as concrete: profusely mixed up and profoundly set. They do not know or really care what God’s Word states and they do not want to be confused with facts. In the words of the apostle James, “Let not that man think he shall receive anything from the Lord.”

So, think about how this plays out practically in interpersonal relationships. At some point in time most everyone has trouble, sometimes severe trouble. They will issue a plea for others to pray for them and seem pleased that many people have committed to their cause in prayer, even across denominational lines. Are you thinking? Denominational lines and non-denominational lines are not meaningless. If one believes in baptismal regeneration, church salvation of the spirit of man, apostasy, or many other fundamental positions not supported by Holy Writ, then they are regarding in their heart what the Bible calls iniquity. This is not meant to be condemnatory, rather labeling things for what they are. If I want others to pray for me, I want the prayers of those who do not regard iniquity in their heart. The ears of God are open to a repentant sinner’s cry. He also hears the repentance of saved sinners gone astray as they seek to learn and follow His truth, but if one is satisfied with practicing theology contrary to the plain teaching of the Word, it is iniquity, and it is the height of folly to ask such a one to pray on your behalf. That prayer will not be heard!

FOR THOUGHT: Can you think of some other scriptures that teach us that the ears of the Lord are open to the righteous, but are closed to those who practice iniquity? Give a brief definition of “iniquity.” Name some religious teachings that are iniquitous. Does understanding this make a difference in how you view some churches?

“DO” AND “DO NOT” SPEAKS

“Not everyone 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.” Matthew 7:21.

The pathway of life is dotted with hundreds, even thousands, of folks whom we are privileged to meet. Without paying specific attention to it, impressions are tucked away in our minds regarding each one of them. Some of those impressions are the result of what people do, or how they act, or perhaps what they do not do. Such also are the impressions we make on others as a Christian. Jesus taught that “Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them” Matt. 7:21. We project ourselves vocally, but sometimes quietness is very powerful, too. There is an old expression so often proven to be true: actions speak louder than words. Lifestyle and words must match. If they do not, I think it was Emerson who once said, “How can I believe what you say when what you are keeps ringing in my ears?” How many times have the good things we do become marginalized by an insensitive (perceived hypocritical) line that succeeded only in building a wall that is difficult to overcome?

On the other hand, positive impressions may be made by what one does not do. To illustrate, my wife and I were en route to Australia a number of years ago. In Los Angeles, our airplane became incapacitated by a cracked windshield, creating a six-hour delay. Passengers grew most unhappy and vociferous about it. Upon boarding, there came an announcement to appease unhappy passengers that drinks were on the airline, as many as you want.

After a couple of hours into the flight, we were approached by a passenger who wanted to know if I were a “padre.” When asked why she would think such a thing, the reply was, “You two are the only ones on the plane not drinking.” That created the scenario for effective witnessing, and sure enough, we were among the few who could deplane in Honolulu without assistance, but several knew who we were and Whom we served.

Some feel they have not witnessed unless they have aggressively thrown up a righteous wall, but God can use quiet living within the harmony of His Word to create effective opportunities. If there is no immediate turning to the Lord by others, there is no failure. It is God Who does the winning. However, no one escapes being an impression in the minds of others. The choices we make, the things we do, and do not do, are a powerful part of that.

FOR THOUGHT: What do you think Jesus was emphasizing in Matthew 7:21?

Have others made you feel less a disciple of Jesus if you failed to positively witness to everyone you meet regardless of the circumstance?

Do you think there are times when the best witnessing is done by actions, or a lack of actions, rather than words? Recall a couple of such instances.

DO YOU UNDERSTAND?

From the early days of childhood, life revolves around the acquisition of the many things offered: knowledge, power, talents, material objects, love and acceptance, and the list goes on. Modern times make it possible for one to spend his allotted time on earth in pursuit of such things with no time left to enjoy whatever pleasure they seem to promise. Obviously, wise choices must be made. Careers are important, but there are things more important than careers. Think with me about this.

The grand intellectual commodities are known as knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. Quite naturally, Solomon had much to say regarding each one. In Proverbs 4:7 he said, *“Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding.”* So, working down from the top, the principal thing is wisdom. Wisdom is said to be the best application of understood knowledge. Wisdom, therefore, is intellectual exercise of acquired knowledge and understanding, and is dependent upon these being in place to be demonstrated. But just any old knowledge, and even the understanding of that knowledge may be acquired, and the person still be devoid of wisdom. After all, it was the lure of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil that became the downfall of the first couple and all of their posterity. Wisdom was not in play on that fateful day. So how may one excel in the grand acquisition of knowledge, understanding, and wisdom? Everyone should listen closely to the man to whom God gave wisdom more than any before him or any after him. Consider these words from him. *“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge”* Prov. 1:7. *“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding.”* Proverbs 9:10.

God’s people are enjoined to be big believers in every word that proceeds forth from the mouth of God. But one cannot believe what he does not know. Consequently, the pursuit of the knowledge of God is primary, acquiring it is the acquisition of understanding, and the reverential fear of God is the beginning of the principal thing: wisdom.

In summary, Solomon said, *“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.”* Ecc. 12:13-14. This statement should send any rational person scurrying to the wisdom store. It is here for you!

Should any of God’s people lack wisdom, James 1:5 states, *“If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.”* The present world ever allures with false knowledge, false understanding, false wisdom, while that which is true remains the properties of God Who is pleased to impart these things to men on His own terms. The question in the title must be repeated: DO YOU UNDERSTAND?

FOR THOUGHT: Briefly define “Knowledge,” “Understanding,” “Wisdom.”

Why do you think a lot of Christians are short on these things?

How may one become a knowledgeable, understanding Christian?

Then how may that same person become a wise Christian?

DOCTRINES ARE NOT TAUGHT HERE!

Words do have specific meanings. Sometimes that meaning is more difficult than others to pin down (to the delight of lawyers), but the meaning is there. To assume the meaning of words may be embarrassing at least, to dangerous, and harmful at most. Think with me for a moment.

A young minister spent a considerable amount of time visiting patients in hospitals. Not being educated in medical terms or jargon, he often assumed the meaning of terms from the incomplete context of the conversation of others. Upon hearing a question asked about a person known to be seriously ill, "Is he lucid?", he assumed "lucid" meant unconscious or otherwise not aware of present surroundings. "Lucid" was a new term to him, and for a short time his perception of it was not "lucid." Of course, the term means just the opposite, that one is clearly aware of the present. So, what does this have to do with the present point?

More than once have I heard the ignorant affirmation, in church attendance invitations, "We do not teach doctrines here." Say what? "Doctrine" means "teaching." The misinformed person is actually saying, "We do not teach any teaching here." But, if no teaching of teachings goes on, then what do they teach, and how may a worship service teach nothing at all, and if they teach anything, they are indoctrinating.

To make matters worse, they are proudly ascribing that characteristic to a church which they think to be the Lord's church. Surely such a blatantly false statement should be more than enough for any nominally educated person to run in the opposite direction. The burden of this article is not to educate the heretics, but to wise up members of the Lord's true churches who may be wrongly affixing meaning to terms by assumption rather than a dictionary. The list of misuse could go on, but let it be sufficient to say that the churches of our altogether wonderful Lord have much to teach and are not misinformed nor afraid of the term "doctrine." The parting words of the Savior to His church included, "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." Matthew 28:20.

Paul told Timothy, "*Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt save thyself, and them that hear thee.*" I Tim. 4:16.

Blessed indeed are those who do not assume but search out what is solidly true. Blessed are those who frame words in the proper context and blessed are those who attend the church services similar to those where this writer is pastor. Doctrines will be taught here, and not sparingly!

FOR THOUGHT: What did Paul tell Timothy to pay attention to? Would doing so result in some very good things? What?

Why do you think "doctrine" has become a word to avoid by a lot of churches? May a church avoid doctrine and remain one of the Lord's churches? Why or how?

DRINKING SATANIC KOOL-AID

A few decades ago, a man of great charismatic personality with the common name of Jim Jones successfully allured about one thousand of his followers to the tropical, isolated jungle where they built a compound, encampment complete with airstrip. They were preparing themselves in isolation to be away from the world, and into the next life. As time went on, some became discontent, but were unable to leave. On examination by a party that included a congressman, the examining party was murdered as they attempted to leave and the population was given poison Kool-Aid to drink to usher them into the next life. A few days later, the camp was found with everyone dead.

From that dreadful event has come the expression, "Don't drink the Kool-Aid!" It reminds us of so many biblical warnings and admonitions regarding spiritual "Kool-Aid." From the Garden of Eden, the battle for the spirit and mind of man has constantly waged. From the "Kool-Aid" offered by the serpent to Adam and Eve, to the religious debate over what was right between Cain and Abel, to the ruination of the antediluvian world, and on to this very day, there has been no relenting of it. The decision weighs heavily on every individual: what to believe, how to proceed, what to do? The crux of these weighty matters suffers no small number of Kool-Aid vendors.

Ancient Israel knew mountainous onslaughts from the idol gods of the gentiles around them, bringing harsh and swift judgment from the Almighty upon them. From false religion, false doctrine, to "every man doing what was right in his own eyes" lessons of life were painfully, repeatedly learned. During His ministry on earth, Jesus warned His disciples to "beware the leaven of the Pharisees." Matthew 16:11-12. By this they understood that He referenced false doctrine (Kool-Aid!).

To facilitate ingesting the Kool-Aid, another form of it has been quite successfully sold. It is the idea that a layman, untrained theologically, cannot understand or rightly apply the teachings of the Word to his life. He must have professional help! Nothing could be farther from the truth. The Holy Spirit of God accompanies the Word of God, and anyone who desires to know the doctrines of the Bible shall know them. It does require that one be exposed to them. So, what are you waiting for? Open the Book! Read for yourself! Prayerfully seek God's help for your understanding, and then act on what He teaches you! There is no safety in numbers of people of any particular persuasion, and the flavors of Kool-Aid are multiplied. **DON'T DRINK THE KOOL-AID!**

FOR THOUGHT: How does poison Kool-Aid and false doctrine relate to each other?

Do you agree that some poison Kool-Aid (false doctrine) really sounds good, and is readily accepted by those who are largely ignorant of the Bible?

Think of, and list, some instances in the Bible where poison Kool-Aid was taken. What was the result?

DROSS ON THE CROWN JEWELS OF ENGLAND

"And I will turn my hand upon thee, and purely purge away thy dross, and take away all thy tin:" Isaiah 1:25.

The crown jewels of England are sometimes referenced as the wealth of stability to royalty, and in some measure, to the country itself. I suppose it may be compared to Fort Knox in the U.S. Most have seen pictures of the vast supply of gold bars in the vaults of Fort Knox, but have never been there to see it in reality. Although the currency of the U.S. is no longer backed by gold, its presence remains a stabilizing factor in the economy.

However, the crown jewels of England, while stored in the Tower of London under heavy guard and extremely thick walls, are treated differently. They are the possession of the state and are loaned to royalty for special events. As a matter of fact, pieces are often carried out for special purposes quite regularly.

It was the privilege of my wife and I to view a large display of those jewels. The occasion did not produce wonder or lust, rather amazement and some disappointment. Not being all that familiar with the precious metals and gems, their value could only be appreciated in the words of the guide. The five-to-eight pound crowns seemed extravagant nonsense, and so highly impractical. That certain crowns had been worn by ancient monarchs put some people in awe; to the rest of us it was, "So?" A virtual mountain of silver and gold would not have excited me too much. However, one thing was apparent: the pure content of silver and gold tarnished by an occasional film of dross. It was a reminder that, after all, those things are mere elements of this world, and they will pass away.

On the other hand, there is silver and gold that will not pass away. It is the silver and gold of a righteous life. Paul spoke to the church of the Living God at Corinth about this treasure in I Corinthians 3:16-19. It is the silver, gold, and precious stones that will survive the judgment fires of God in the day that all of us face: The Judgment Seat of Christ. In that day everything unrighteous will be the victim of Holy Fire, but what survives the fire is not wood, hay, stubble (unrighteous deeds) but gold, silver, and precious stones (righteous acts of life).

In that judgment fire another great benefit is realized. The gold, silver, and precious stones have all the dross removed, not for a little while to then recollect it, but forever. What a day that will be!

God made a promise to His people through the prophet Isaiah saying, *"And I will turn my hand upon thee, and purely purge away thy dross, and take away thy tin:"* While He spoke of things He would create on the condition of their repentance, He has made much greater and brighter promises to us concerning the day when He will take all our dross away! Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

FOR THOUGHT: Precious metals are recognized for their value, but do you pity a nation whose sense of wellbeing rests in the amount of such metals accumulated?

Outside of faith in Christ, do you believe men may labor for material wealth only to put it into bags with holes in it?

What kind of gold and silver did Jesus want His people to accumulate?

EASTER THOUGHTS

Why Easter? The question will leave one exhausted and confused by myriad explanations. Let's take a condensed look.

First, the name "Easter" is of various origins, including Anglo-Saxon, German and Latin. It alludes to the direction, east. In earlier times the general populace much more closely observed the sun and moon than they do today. The world was basically agricultural of necessity; hence, the importance of determining the certainty of planting time. It was after the northern spring equinox sun was determined. That meant that precise day when day and night were exactly the same length. So, the rising of the sun at a precise point on the horizon signaled the change from winter to spring.

Additionally, there were numerous mythological gods with names close to this word. In many segments of the world, they were worshipped as gods, goddesses of fertility and spring. The word is used one time in the Bible as a mistranslation of the word "Passover."

Secondly, how is Easter Sunday determined? It is the first Sunday, following the first full moon following the northern spring equinox. This lends credence to its ancient origin being attached to paganism and agriculture rather than a specific date commemorating the resurrection of Jesus, such as His birth is commemorated by a specific date, Dec. 25th.

Thirdly, what does it mean to us today? In the "Christian" world it is arguably the holiest of all holidays, commemorating the resurrection of Jesus. To a lesser number of true Christians who are more strict Bible believers, every Sunday is rightfully a commemoration of Jesus' resurrection. They are mindful of what Paul said to the churches of Galatia in 4:10-11.

Fourthly, did Jesus actually arise on the first day of the week? He did! But it must be remembered that Jewish days are counted from six o'clock to six o'clock p.m., which almost always genders the question of what day He was crucified. It was anytime following six o'clock Saturday evening (dawning of the next day.) Count backward to include three days and three nights, and you will have the answer.

While we may rightfully lament the silliness of a rabbit that lays colored eggs being emblematic of Easter to a lot of folks, I do hope and pray that the observance of the day will bring to their consciousness the real story of a crucified and risen Savior and the eternal life to be had in Him through repentance and faith.

FOR THOUGHT: Can you explain the origin of the word "Easter?" Explain how Easter Sunday is determined since it moves around on your calendar. What is more important to you, an annual day called Easter, or worship of the risen Christ each first day of the week?

EASTER, IS IT BIBLICAL?

"And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him; intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people." Acts 4:12.

It is Easter Sunday. So much about it is simply taken for granted. What is actually known about this day celebrated by the entire "Christian" world, and why is it so called? Moreover, how does one know when it is Easter Sunday, and why is it celebrated if it is not in the Bible? Please think with me for a moment!

The meaning of the word "Easter" is controversial. Most historians tend to credit one English monk of the 8th century A.D. with the earliest usage of the word in connection with Christianity. It is believed to be a carryover name of a mythical goddess worshipped by very early Anglo people, associated with feasts in the spring, especially in April. Also, the idea of fertility was associated with this goddess.

From the early dark age onward, the Roman Church often pre-opted pagan holidays, incorporating them into their church celebrations to gain their population. Regardless, the term has been stripped of any pagan meaning, and it has been designated "Resurrection Sunday" among Christians for hundreds of years. Perhaps the only remnant of pagan thought remaining may be found in the colored eggs (symbols of fertility), but the idea of a bunny (also a symbol of fertility to the ancients) laying such eggs is mind-blowing nonsense.

So, how does one know when it is Easter Sunday aside from being told so by others? It is determined by finding the first Sunday after the first full moon following the Spring equinox in the northern hemisphere. Readers will undoubtedly remember this formula forever! . . . not!

Finally, if it is not in the Bible, then why do I read "Easter" in Acts 12:4? The fact that English translations, especially KJV uses the word in Acts 12:4 is solid evidence that both the word and the holiday it designates had been long embedded in the minds of early translators of scriptures, especially such giants as William Tyndale and Wycliffe.

However, research of Bible languages will show that here "Easter" is given as a translation of the Greek and Hebrew terms for "Passover," (Paschal). Contextually, Peter had been imprisoned, and it was the intention of Herod to try him before the Jewish people following PASSOVER, (not Easter)!

Then, does it follow that it is wrong to recognize and celebrate Easter with the meaning presently attached to it? Not at all! In fact, it is always appropriate to celebrate the glorious resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is for this very reason that the Lord's churches meet on Sunday, the first day of the week. It is a long-held tradition from apostolic days, repeatedly honoring the resurrection of Jesus on the first day of the week.

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think more Christians celebrate Easter as a national holiday than as a memorial to Jesus' resurrection? What seems to be the emphasis in your community? Do you appreciate Sunday worship services as a specific memorial to Jesus' resurrection? Where do colored chickens, rabbits, and eggs fit into the idea of Easter?

ECUMENISM: RELIGION'S LOSING GAME

“And the Lord said, ‘Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.’ So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.” Genesis 11:6-8.

“Ecumenism,” what is it, anyway? The word is basically Latin and means “the whole world” according to several dictionaries. Within the Christian context, it means the idea and/or the movement to bring all of the “Christian churches” in the world together as one. Protestants and most neo-Protestants see this as invisible and universal. Catholics largely see this as persuading all churches to return to the universal, visible Catholic fold from which they supposedly went astray. Baptists, on the other hand, know that Catholics originated by departing from them in the fourth century. They see it as rank heresy; religious baloney, to be avoided at all costs.

The history of ecumenism is interesting, but it is bad. The first ecumenical movement succeeded in society at large in the days of Noah. God destroyed the entire world as a result (except for those on the Ark, of course.) Natural men are sinful, fleshly and do not learn spiritual truths as those things can only be spiritually discerned. I Cor. 2:14. Soon, time after the flood found the whole populated world in another ecumenical movement at the Tower of Babel. To break it up, God created languages, and the population was segregated to the language they could understand. Accordingly, the language and scattering of the people created an effective separation which has served well until recent times.

Today, modern technology has all but eliminated the barrier of language. Additionally, modern transportation allows men to be global in bodily presence in only a few hours. Communications are global and instant, and for many years world leaders have been working consistently on a “New World (ecumenical) Order.” It is intended to be ecumenical politically, economically, and religiously. So, nations march steadily onward toward that goal purported to be the apex of man’s existence, but apart from his Creator, and in the abandonment of the very idea of individualism and exceptionalism.

All of this does not bode well for the nations, but it is their determined goal. Still the Creator’s clarion call to all who will hear Him is to “come out from among them and be ye separate saith the Lord.” 2 Cor. 6:17. Baptist churches stand or fall on their understanding and treatment of the Word. For them ecumenism offers nothing to gain, and everything to lose. They have stood on God’s truth while Catholic, Protestant and Neo-protestants rejected their message to go their own way. Doubtless, it will be increasingly harder to stand for the true principles of God’s Word, but by the grace of God some will, and I desire for you and me to be in that number.

FOR THOUGHT: Have you heard ecumenism more positively supported than not? What do you think the world hopes to gain in an ecumenical movement? What do you think some churches hope to gain by it? Do you see it in light of history, in light of God’s Word? When the pressure of ecumenism grows very strong do you think you will be able to resist it? How?

ESTEEM EVERY MAN A LIAR

From the pages of Holy Writ comes what some would consider startling statements. Indeed, the original languages of the Bible are very strong. They do not mince words or leave gaping holes of misunderstanding. Often, they are downright offensive to natural man, and especially so to those who choose to live self-righteously. Think with me for a moment!

In Romans Paul tells of the knowledge advantage of the Jewish people since they had been the covenant people of God. But what if some of them chose to not believe the oracles of God? Would that make the faith of God to be without effect? His conclusion is *“God forbid: yea, let God be true, but every man a liar; as it is written, That thou mightest be justified in thy sayings, and mightest overcome when thou art judged.”* Romans 3:4.

Self-righteous folks are indeed greatly offended at the prospect of being considered a liar, but this is an indictment against all men, not just the self-righteous. Moreover, this is a personal judgment call, not a prosecutorial one. The Bible does not encourage in any way overt, railing accusations regardless of from whom to whom. What is under consideration is the way the testimonies of others are received and judged in one's own mind.

It is here that Biblical warnings rush to the forefront. Such sayings as those of Solomon, who said, “There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof is the ways of death.” Prov. 14:12. Then the warning of the Apostle John flashes, not every spirit is from God. “Try the spirits from whence they come.” I John 4:1.

In these latter times, men have been conditioned to leave things to the professionals. Since they have invested a lifetime of study and experience, they must know and are to be trusted. Think what this means!

In spiritual matters, not some, but ALL have sinned and come short of the glory of God. In this state, sincerity is not excusable. Men are blinded to spiritual truth and their most sincere desire will not substitute for the Word of God. So, whom does one trust, the wearer of fig leaves or the Lamb Who provides clothing of righteousness?

Earthly family may care for you as no other, but when it comes to the eternal verities that affect the never-dying soul, there is only one source trustworthy as equipment for eternity, and as sustainment in judgment. The word of any person is only good and profitable as it coincides with the Word that shall not pass away. As the beloved apostle put it, “. . . yea, let God be true, but every man a liar; as it is written, That thou mightest be justified in thy sayings, and mightest overcome when thou art judged.” Romans 3:4.

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think the evaluation of every man as a liar in comparison to the Bible is too strong or too harsh? Why?

If this evaluation is absolutely true, why do men prefer the preachments of men when those preachments conflict with the Bible? Does not compromising the Bible make it a liar?

Your individual evaluation of these things is vitally important to your well-being.

EVER CHANGING, EVER THE SAME

Not by a thousand miles am I the only one whose ears are dull of hearing, and whose belief system is drained by the platitudes of modern politicians repeating the theme of “change.” “Change” is the premiere political word from local to the national scene. Followers appear energized by the prospect, and voters have been swept up in the frenzy of potential difference. But as the old saying goes, the more things change, the more they stay the same!

One may smile and pass off the illustrious promises of the political world, but truly troubling is when church rolls are swelled by those who have experienced no change. Change in the heart of men is not just good advice, or acceptable theology. It is absolutely essential. One cannot expect to go to heaven at physical death unless there has been a change in his heart. Jesus said that whosoever would fall on the stone (Himself) would be broken, but on whomsoever it fell, it would grind him to powder. Either way effects change, but the latter is not to be desired. His teaching here and elsewhere emphasizes the absolute necessity of change. Repentance, genuine sorrow over the presence of sin, is still a key word in a spiritual relationship with the Creator/Redeemer.

Christianity really is confusing and boring all at the same time where there is no personal change. Churches often yield to the whims of men rather than the strong, plain teaching of the scriptures through pressures from members who are unchanged. Challenges that arise from the craftiness of Satan sometimes tear churches apart because too many of the members have not experienced change. Congregations are turned from the prime directives of the Word to pleasing themselves and/or the community around them due to the absence of change. Where an ongoing, personal relationship with God is absent or starved for nourishment, a weakened church is evident, and if not corrected, it may cease to exist as a spiritual institution of God.

Then let all who claim the name of the Lord Jesus Christ join in the immortal words of John Newton as a real, living testimony, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me; I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.” Let that change, initially found in faith in Christ Jesus, go on to know (see) the truth that will make the holder of it to be free, John 8:32. Receiving the Holy Word of God as one’s final rule of faith and practice effects change! Rom 12:1-3. In that state, things are never the same, but always exciting in the inexhaustible growth offerings of the Word!

FOR THOUGHT: Do the platitudes of pandering politicians induce skepticism in your thinking? Could it be that multiplied religious philosophies bring the same effect to some lost people? What and where is the power of actual change in human life? Is there any other place or way than that presented in the New Testament? If you think “Yes,” what is it? Have you found that faith in Christ actually does bring change to your heart and life? Why do you think some find it to be more of the same rather than genuine change?

FATHER OF MODERN SUNDAY SCHOOL

“But Jesus called them unto him, and said, “Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God.” Luke 18:16.

While it is impossible to know just when the first Sunday School was held, one Robert Raikes is credited as being the founder of it. It is interesting as to how it came about. Think with me for a moment.

Robert Raikes was born on September 14, 1736 in the city of Gloucester, England. He worked with his father in his print shop and took it over when his father died. He became a fairly wealthy philanthropist who himself had 3 sons and 7 daughters.

Adults died early in those days, then the plague took an even greater toll. Orphans were everywhere. They never had the privilege of formal education, having to work 12 hours or more each day in order to survive. Many worked in coal, and other difficult manual labor jobs for a pittance of pay. On Sundays, their only day off, they would fill the streets, get into fights, steal, and disturb. In those days there were no public schools in England.

Robert Raikes enlisted the help of a clergy friend, and they determined to establish a Sunday School. It was not as Sunday Schools are thought of today. It was all day long. In the morning math and reading were taught, then the rest of the day was spent teaching Bible lessons.

At first, only a few attended because they lived in abject poverty, wore very poor clothing, and were often dirty. Robert Raikes let it be known that all that was required was a clean face and combed hair, plus they would get something to eat. Clothes did not matter. Soon his Sunday School numbered 100 or more. As he printed news of it in his newspaper, The Gloucester Journal, other Sunday Schools began to spring up around the country. Robert Raikes died in 1811, but by 1831 over a million children were attending Sunday Schools in England.

It was this writer's privilege to visit Gloucester a number of years ago, and to have lunch in a restaurant that was one of the buildings used in that early endeavor. Centuries have come and gone, and multiplied millions of children have benefited from Sunday School, where they learned of the Lord Jesus, and came to know Him in salvation. Great is the reward of those who bring the children to Him! Thank you, Robert Raikes, and all who have stepped up to the plate!

FOR THOUGHT: Did you know that Sunday School is relatively new to church ministry, and that it started in England?

Reflecting on your own Sunday School experience as a child, was it, and is it, still a spiritual blessing to you? How?

FIRST THINGS FIRST, THE FIRST AND GREATEST COMMANDMENT

“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. This is the first and great commandment.’” Matthew 22:37-38.

In the din and noise of the Christmas season, one often finds his focus shifted away from the reason for the season to the commerce of it all. True churches of the Lord do not celebrate Christmas any more than they celebrate Easter. But these days are recognized as federal holidays intended to honor the Christ of our salvation, and to some extent we are carried along in the force of it even though our understanding of it is quite different to that of the world.

Not only at Christmas or Easter or any other special day, but throughout the year we focus on our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. We should be studying about Him, praying to Him, talking about Him, and seeking to advance His cause. We must not get carried away from truth, in worldliness, nor in misguided piety as some do pointing to Romans 9:3. Here they either pretend to love lost souls more than any human possibly could or else they live in anguish because they cannot love others to the degree they think is mentioned here. That verse states, “For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh.” This verse needs to be looked over realistically in context of what Paul had experienced and was actually saying.

I have known tremendously great, dedicated people of God, but I have never known one who was willing to go to hell himself for others. If so, would that not mean that others were loved more than the Christ of one’s salvation? Such simply is not possible. But is this not what Paul was saying, or did he actually say something else?

Young’s Literal Translation of the scriptures translates this verse, “For I was wishing, I myself, to be anathema from Christ for my brethren, my kindred, according to the flesh.” Notice “was.” The apostle here refers to his past. Surely, this is what Paul meant: while a practicing Pharisee, he was zealous in persecuting Christians, and wanted nothing to do with Christ. He wanted to please his kindred according to the flesh.

The following verses in Romans Nine explain that there is a difference between the fleshly Israel (whom he sought to please earlier) and the true seed of promise. In context, this verse makes better sense than painting a pious picture that no human could fulfill, and one that would be wrong if it were possible.

So, what shall we say then? Share the gospel! Help others as much as possible, but love God more. Remember the first and greatest commandment. Also remember the witness of Solomon in Ecclesiastes 12:13, “Let us hear the conclusion of the matter. Fear God and keep His commandments for this is the whole duty of man.” It is Jesus first, not humanity first!

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think a lot of believers have been discouraged because they thought they should love their fellow man enough to give up their hope in Christ, but could not do that? What do you think to be the ultimate expression of love for God presently? Is this what the first great commandment teaches? How did Solomon put it in Ecc. 12:13?

FITLY FRAMED: A PRODUCT OF TOOLING

"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." Ephesians 2:21-22.

"Fitly framed" is an interesting description of carpentry, both in English, and in the ancient Greek language from which it comes. In Greek, it is expressed as one composite word, "*sunarmologeo*." According to lexicons of that language, the term means to literally lay or join parts together. But the idea is to lay such joints together in exactness to create useful construction.

In carpentry, joints in materials must be fitted closely to be useful. While framing may allow for minor cracks, finished carpentry must be more closely tooled and exact. Neither the framing or finishing carpenter may use materials in the rough or uncut as they are sold in retail lumber stores. But each piece must be cut to proper length, and correct angle, and perhaps sanding and gluing for a proper fit; hence, "fitly framed." Every joint then, in a well-built building, is a product of tooling. Much can be discerned from this terminology, as the Holy Spirit so moved the apostle Paul to use these words to describe the church of the Living God.

In other figures of speech, the process of church growth is fashioned in farming. The ministers of the Word sow the seed of the Word, others may water that seed, but it is always God who gives the increase. It is God who adds to His church. It may also be inferred that God does not add any junk or useless parts to His church, and every addition is not in the natural or raw state but will be fitly framed (disciplined by the Word) to make a useful joint.

Unlike inanimate materials of wood or stone that feel no pain in chipping, sawing, or sanding, the members of Christ's body will discern, though not always in pain, the sizing into the holy body. Through the tooling of the Word, members so joined realize their deadness to the world, and their new life in the body. It is a fitting of joy that never brings regret, but the enhancement of hope.

But every positive has a negative. Houses can be built on the sand, bricks may be laid without mortar, and sticks fashioned together without fasteners. In each case, or a combination, these failures are predictable. Men fall into futile activity when they run ahead of God, seeking to build their way instead of His way. Truly, except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain who build. A strong, scriptural church is not an overnight phenomenon, but the patient careful teaching, tooling, and exercise of the Word over time. Such blessings belong to those who love the Word and wait on the Lord, as it is stated so picturesquely in Isa. 40:31, *"But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."* God's people should pray for grace to be still, and to keep on keeping on through the tooling process!

FOR THOUGHT: What do you think will happen to a church that makes membership to be no more than simple membership in a civic club?

Would you buy a house whose bricks were merely stacked without mortar? Why?

If spiritual things are spiritually understood, how may unspiritual people be an asset to a church? Explain what you mean.

FLOURISHING CHURCHES IN VARIED CULTURES

“And he said unto them, ‘Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.’” Mark 16:15.

The church of our Lord began with 100 percent Jewish members. It quickly spread to multi-nations around the Middle East, then to Africa, Europe, and Asia. It has thrived under varied governmental systems, races, and cultures. Through Bible missionary efforts, the spread continues, and will do so until the end of the age.

Sometimes it is hard for people in one nation or culture to appreciate how the church can thrive in another, but by the design and grace of God it does. A case in point is Australia. Some think of it as America 50 years ago, but they are wrong. The largely Anglo, English speaking population is noticeably different, partly because it is a people steeped in socialism. Let me illustrate with a couple of points.

On a trip there, the pilot of our aircraft announced an unscheduled stop in Fiji. He stated that the aircraft had to take on enough fuel to land in Australia, and to make it back to Fiji since fuel was not available in Australia. Curious as to why, I was told the petrol workers were on strike because they were not being furnished underwear in their compensation. Incredible! But it was true.

In the suburbs of Sydney, there were large housing areas of what appeared to be three-bedroom, two bath homes. But a point of curiosity was the little house in every backyard. Those were outdoor toilets. The housing developments were government controlled, and though some of the areas were well over ten years old, they still did not have a sewer system, and were forbidden to install a septic system on parcels of land under five acres. So, they all used outhouses, patiently waiting for the government to do something for them.

It all seemed so strange! Could a scriptural church rise up and operate with people of this mindset? Indeed, it could and did. It continues to do so in many cities of that nation.

The core doctrines of the Faith once delivered to the saints are not bound by time, culture, governments, or by nationality. They are the expression of the Creator, Redeemer God of heaven and earth. It is His expressed will that all men should be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. I Timothy 2:4.

So, whether a people find themselves in a democracy, republic, communist state, monarchy, oligarchy, socialistic, or fascist state, the gospel is still the power of God to them by which they may be saved, and the doctrines of the Bible are still available to them through the administration of the Holy Spirit, by which they may experience the blessings of being a part of the local, New Testament church. I thank God for His churches in America, and I pray for their existence the world over!

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think Americans may have their democracy and Christianity mixed up by how they feel about the church thriving under different systems? Why?

In your church, do you believe the majority should rule, or that the Bible should rule? Why?

Do you think you could properly serve God in a country of some other governmental form?

Why? Why not?

FOCUS ON THE TRUE TREASURE OF LIFE

It has been said of life that it is not the destination that counts so much as the journey! Well, that statement requires considerable explanation before it is acceptable. Both the journey and the destination are vitally important. No one makes them well without commitment and dedication to God, and to His Holy Word. Indeed, true treasure is not in a bag or bank as most men count treasure. A proper journey with the proper destination in mind accumulates the true treasures in the course of life. They are not metal or stone of earth's substance, but riches laid up in heaven for eternal enjoyment.

The correct journey of life is one of continuous additions of virtues. Some of these are gained by pursuit, and others are outright gifts. Think about it.

As one reaches the age of accountability, the goodness of God convicts of sin, righteousness, and judgment to come. When one repents and receives Jesus as personal Savior, the new birth occurs immediately, and it is wholly by grace through faith, and not of self, but it is the gift of God. Eph. 2:8-10 states it plainly, *"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast."*

Predicated on that, one has the blessed opportunity to exercise free moral agency in spiritual things; to grow in the grace of God; submitting to baptism, fellowshipping in a New Testament Church, cultivating routines of bible study, prayer, witnessing, etc.

High on the list of encouragement to all God's children is growth in knowledge. It must be pursued. Moreover, as Solomon put it, in the acquisition of knowledge one should, with all his getting, get understanding. These virtues build, one upon another, and will not be obtained if not actively sought. However, the Bible does not admonish anyone to work to acquire wisdom. This virtue is another great gift from God. James 1:5 puts it this way in his epistle, *"If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not . . ."* Wisdom is the ability to expertly handle knowledge. Do you have it? Do you want it? Ask God! He alone is the giver of wisdom. Those who possess this priceless virtue are the true winners in life. Their focus is on the true treasure!

FOR THOUGHT: How do you evaluate the journey of life with the destination, and vice-versa? What did Solomon advise one to get in addition to knowledge? Everybody admires a wise man, yet so few seem to have that requisite. Why is that?

FOOL ME ONCE, FOOL ME TWICE, AND FOOL ME ONCE AGAIN!

The first half of the 19th century is dubbed as the second great awakening in America. In the 1840s the Millerite movement arose, so called after a prominent leader, William Miller. He had it figured out that Jesus would return on October 22, 1844. No small crowd of folks divested themselves of worldly goods and waited with great expectation. Of course, it did not happen. The event became known as the Great Disappointment. But, not to give up, the date was supposedly found with error and a new date set. That did not happen either. Did the followers dissipate? Some did, but enough stayed the error to evolve into the Seventh Day Adventist Denomination.

A few decades ago, a small sect of folks believed a leader that set the date for Christ's return to earth. This was here in western Arkansas. They, too, divested themselves of material things. Many of them sat on a housetop with great expectations of seeing the monumental event. They, too, suffered a great disappointment due to ignorance of the Word of God. The charade of religious charlatans goes on. Dates are set, discolored moons due to atmospheric conditions are observed, etc. So, fool me once, and fool me twice, and fool me once again! Those who seek to know and to serve God would do well to hear the warnings of Jesus as He spoke them. One powerful one is recorded in Luke 21:8, "*And he said, Take heed that ye be not deceived: for many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and the time draweth near: go ye not therefore after them.*"

What is sorely needed is for God's people to immerse themselves in the pages of Holy Writ, to be personally informed, and thereby have the ability to share knowledge of spiritual things. Ironically, church houses are often filled with folks who have really good intentions of doing just that. But one philosopher once noted that good intentions are like good eggs, if they are not hatched in a timely manner, they will soon rot.

So, what are you waiting for? What is your purpose for taking up space on the planet? Some followers of Jesus wanted to wait until their father died and was buried, but Jesus said, "*Let the dead bury their dead. Follow me!*" Let everyone forget about the noble dreams of tomorrow. God gives us all today! Yesterday is gone forever, and tomorrow does not exist. What you have is today. You may have been fooled once, or twice. Must you be fooled again?

FOR THOUGHT: Name some catastrophe of recent years that has come upon groups of folks by their ignorance of God's Word.

Why do you think people are so vulnerable in religion when they appear to be so brilliant in secular subjects?

Do you think repeated failure to trust Christ and His Word opens people up to believe falsehood?

FREEDOM AND RIGHTEOUSNESS REQUIRE VIGILANCE

As the United States of America wades deep into its third century of being a free and independent nation, it does so without the mainstream of its citizenry possessing the values and resolve that initiated it and supported it through tough, sad, hard, and happy times. That loss is fundamental, so fundamental that the nation as it was framed may not endure much longer.

What happened? Think with me!

Solomon wrote: *“Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise: Which having no guide, overseer, or ruler, provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest. How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? When wilt thou arise out of thy sleep? Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep: So shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth, and thy want as an armed man.”* Proverbs 6:6-11.

The greatest gift a nation could hope to possess in war with another would be to find them all asleep on the day of battle. Vigilance has its virtue and sleep its calamity! In spiritual warfare, the forces of evil have succeeded in rocking this nation to sleep on toxic materialism. When a majority of the population finds it more palatable to abandon its talent, mental acumen, self-determination, and personal freedom in favor of whoever will put the biggest check in the mailbox, the devil himself has no trouble garnering the necessary votes to rule, even when it is known, but not fully comprehended, that his rule will be their enslavement. Such induced lethargy and sleep provided from the labor of others wins in the battle of preferences in an unprincipled people.

This weekend, much celebration will mark yet another year in the founding of the United States of America. What a Godsend it has been to His people who for centuries yearned to be free to worship Him according to the dictates of their conscience and understanding of Holy Writ! However, judicial actions of the past half century afford much to lament in witnessing its decline. The shining global example of freedom and blessedness of this nation is a story of bloodshed, principle, dedication, and hard work. Let all who love this country stand fast in these things and be a part of its grand story. Let us all give ear to the words of the wise man who so eloquently penned, “Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people.” Proverbs 14:34.

FOR THOUGHT: Do you recall calamitous events of American history due to leadership of the nation being asleep? What about the Oklahoma City bombing in 1996? What about Pearl Harbor in 1941? What about the World Trade Center in New York? How vigilant should a nation be? Why do you think this way?

FREEDOM TO BE UNEQUAL

(Friend and brother in the ministry, Jim Harris of Florida, is credited with this idea. He may or may not approve of the contents.)

“Art thou called being a servant? Care not for it: but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather. For he that is called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord's freeman: likewise also he that is called, being free, is Christ's servant.” I Corinthians 7:21-22.

The founding documents of the United States of America would have us believe all men are created equal. I wonder where they got that idea? Rather than take issue with equality in creation, let the reader consider that the very moment one comes into this world he/she is both equal and unequal. One's parental status, environment, socioeconomic level, and I.Q. does not provide for equality but for inequality.

Though flawed as all governmental systems of men are, that inequality has, with the help of God, produced the greatest nation on earth. Capitalism's principles are based on the Judeo-Christian ethic of theology, morals, and individual initiatives.

Now, there are those who wish to enrich themselves by pandering to those who will not work, will not pursue an education, but will demand, in violent destructiveness, that those who do have initiative, and who do work, should support them. Government folks in high places push this agenda for their own obvious purpose of staying in power through “votes by pandering,” and seem determined to deprive the nation of capitalistic enterprise. Do they believe the government printing presses can keep the economy afloat forever?

As an aside, many years ago, this writer was placed on a legislative ad hoc committee to draft childcare legislation. In some of the discussions with more liberal committee members over the issue of assurance of preventing failure, it was my premise, then as now, if there is no freedom to fail, there is no freedom. If there is no freedom for all, then there is no freedom at all.

Obviously, it was the Creator's holy will that men have free moral agency; the freedom to win, the freedom to lose, the freedom to live, the freedom to die. Men who reject God and pursue the premise of evolution are determined to change that, but it is a determination destined to fail. Still, there is a sense in which all men are equal; all are sinners, and all are condemned by virtue of sin. The good news is that God provides for all men the freedom to partake of His marvelous grace, and thereby escape the destiny of sin while gaining the wealth and joys of heaven. But that freedom exercised makes men unequal. Let there be rejoicing in heaven and earth that the altogether lovely Lord Jesus, the Creator, the Christ by His own blood purchased for all who love Him, the freedom to be unequal.

FOR THOUGHT: Do you believe all people are created equal in every respect? What about those who cannot provide for themselves?

Do you think all people in heaven will be equal? If so, how do you explain the Judgment Seat of Christ for His people and the difference it will make?

May the equality of men, beyond equal opportunity to excel, ever be anything more than a Satanic lie which has fostered communism, socialism, etc.?

GIVE ME CHILDREN, OR ELSE I DIE!

“And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die.” Genesis 30:1.

Many years ago, my good friend and mentor, Dr. R. T. Perritt, wrote a book entitled, *KINDLING FIRES FOR CHURCH GROWTH*. As the title would suggest, the chapters of the book were devoted to encouragement to the Lord's people to seek growth, both spiritually and numerically, in the churches, but to do it God's way!

The text verse above, reveals an extremely deep desire to fulfill one's purpose in life. For Rachel, the wife of Jacob's choice, it was to bear children. As that scenario may be extrapolated into the present, spiritual realm, it is realized that the churches of the Lord have purpose to fulfill. They realize that unless they are given spiritual children to carry on the great work of Christ's commission to them, they will soon become extinct. Subsequently, the cry of Rachel, "...else I die." will become a reality for the churches.

The anguish of Rachel was heightened by others in the extended family bearing children. In the same manner, churches that are not growing spiritually and numerically see yet others who may not be of the "faith once delivered to the saints" growing numerically can be tempted to reach beyond biblical boundaries to incorporate unqualified members into their fold. That may produce a temporary, false sense of well-being, but growth in the Lord's churches, not accomplished His way, fails to help, and can actually hasten the spiritual death of that body.

Accordingly, as the cry of Rachel was to her husband, so let the cry of God's people be unto Him Who is able to give the proper increase. Let us be done with seeking to do the work that only God can do and increase our efforts in the work He gave us to do! Let us pray earnestly, witness genuinely, live honestly, and enthusiastically according to the hope that lies in our heart. Truly, we can plant the seed. We can water that which is planted, but it is God Who gives the increase. Thus, to the Lord of harvest let us cry, "Give us children, or else we die." This is the increase that will last. It is the increase that will weather the drought, flood, heat, cold, and the fiery darts of the devil that will carefully, cunningly, and inevitably seek to be a dividing snare to every church of the Living God. Then let it be underscored that the unadulterated Word of God should reign supreme in thought and practice, and that prayers should be intensified for the personal, and corporate fulfillment of our purpose of taking up space on the planet.

FOR THOUGHT: To what degree of human motivation should a pastor, evangelist, or church body undertake to swell the church rolls.

Do you believe all lasting increase must be added by the Lord, and it is dangerous to try to fulfill his work of the process?

What does planting and watering in church growth mean?

Do you think modern believers would do well to cry to the Lord using Rachel's plea?

GOD AND MONEY

The great triad of powers bearing heavy influence on men in the world (cosmos) of sin and death are government, finance, and religion, not necessarily in that order. Government is the expression of authority. It ranges from individual self-discipline, and the home to various levels, local to national. Financial power is embodied in the system of money, and that being heavily regulated and guarded as a means of value and exchange of time, goods, and services.

Religion, or spiritual power directly appeals to the spirit nature of mankind and goes to the very core of conviction and motivation of actions and status.

The Bible speaks plainly and forcefully about these forces and how they should regulate behavior. Quite naturally, Biblical instructions differ, often widely, from the common understanding and practice of men who are held in the grips of sin. Think with me for a moment about God and money.

From the earliest of times, men understood that material substance should be used in the expressions of government and religion. Four hundred years prior to Old Testament Law, Abraham paid tithes of material gain to the mysterious priest of God, Melchizedek. Gen.14:20. Later, the practice of tithing was incorporated into the Law God gave to Israel on Mt. Sinai. It involved the medium of money, but also included all other gains, such as crops, herd increase, even the firstborn child.

With the fulfillment of the Law by Jesus, and the institution of grace expressed by the faith once delivered to the saints, tithing as a principle of honoring God for all His blessings did not cease. As a matter of fact, it is specifically taught in the New Testament. Hebrews 7:8.

Still, the idea is not to be considered as a "have to" practice as it was under the Law, but a cheerful opportunity to lay up treasure in heaven. The Lord truly loves a cheerful giver. 2 Cor. 9:7.

Meanwhile, He taught us to use money as an instrument to make friends and influence others that they might be won to the Lord Jesus Christ. Luke 16:9. This involves alms giving and being a general blessing to others along the path of life.

God is not opposed to money, but He knows that under the present system, one cannot primarily serve God and money. But He leads men to trust Him, provides their daily bread, and the sense of great joy in using the money of His blessings to be a blessing both to God's work, and to the good of their fellow men; a big bonus in the plethora of blessings from the Father of Light. James 1:17.

FOR THOUGHT: What three great powers given to men heavily influence the course of history?

Do you believe the Bible actually teaches tithing in the New Testament era? What scripture would you use to support that teaching?

Do you believe a Christian may serve both God and mammon? Why? Why not?

GOD CHANGES MAN'S "FIXED" THEOLOGY

"And there came a voice to him, Rise, Peter; kill, and eat. But Peter said, Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten any thing that is common or unclean. And the voice spake unto him again the second time, What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common. This was done thrice: and the vessel was received up again into heaven." Acts 10:13-16.

Missouri is called the "Show Me" state. That motto has been used in a wide variety of ways, including those of theology. Consider that the First Missionary Baptist Church of Jerusalem enjoyed a tremendous influx of members on Pentecost, all of whom were Jewish. Their theological concept of the New Testament Church was like that of the Mosaic Law, for Jewish membership only. If the terms of the Great Commission, Matthew 28:18-20, were to be carried out, God would have to use some means to open their eyes. This is where Peter and Cornelius came into play. Cornelius was a gentile soldier, but one who prayed to God, did alms, and sought to do the will of God as he understood it, being a non-covenant believer. Since God's plan of spiritual salvation is universal, simple, and set forth in the simplistic terms of Romans 10:13, there is no credible avenue of thought that would consider Cornelius a spiritually lost person. But the church needed to open its mind and doors to the terms of the Great Commission, and Cornelius needed the blessing of New Covenant relationship with God.

As a result, God worked on Peter in the vision of unclean animals; the command to kill and eat, and the forthright rebuttal to Peter's objection. All of this was in preparation for a historic meeting with the first Gentile to be admitted to scriptural baptism and church membership. It was then that the apostle grasped what was happening at the home of Cornelius, but his Jewish brethren who were with him did not understand it. Thus, God allowed Cornelius to display before baptism the presence of the Holy Spirit that rested upon the church. The import was to eliminate any objection the Jewish brethren would have to admitting Cornelius to scriptural baptism, and subsequent church membership. It was a sure enough Missouri type "show me" demonstration that neither the Jewish brethren present nor those to whom a later report was given could deny. It opened their eyes to the meaning of Holy Writ.

Nothing in the Bible is new, but often what is there is new to disciples on various levels of learning. Sometimes seeing (understanding) what was there all the time, but in personal unawareness of it, brings great rejoicing in the Word, and a personal revival. In such a case, one might say that God used an old-fashioned Missouri "show me," and corrected a lot of men's theology, not individual whim, or new revelation; it was there in the Word all the time!

FOR THOUGHT: Have you made recent discoveries in the Bible? How have they changed your thinking? After reading again the story of Cornelius in Acts 10, what are your thoughts about this incident. How do you rationalize the Holy Spirit being manifest in Cornelius before baptism because it was a break in the biblical pattern.

GOD'S WILL: DEVOTION OR DIVERSION?

It was an ordinary day in the land of Moab some 3500 years ago; ordinary that is until messengers of the king knocked on the door of a known prophet of God whose name was Balaam. Similar to modern day ministers, the prophet may have been mildly depressed because he deemed his life to be slipping away in a time of uneventfulness. Perhaps he longed to have the attention of those most prominent in his society, and the popularity, prestige, and greater income that would go with that. Then it happened! He could hardly believe his good fortune. The king recognized his status as a prophet and desired his service. Also, there was a bag of gold in the offering for his hire. Surely, God would be most pleased with this. Perhaps He had even arranged it all. Such was not the case however, and rather than resign himself to the sweet will of God, he badgered, pressed, and besought God for some way to take advantage of the offer. The story is well known. It did not turn out as the prophet had dreamed, but God chose to use it all as teaching lessons for future generations.

In Num. 22-24, God allowed a common donkey to speak sense and wisdom to the prophet, as well as save his life, but that did not deter him. Then, God forbade the prophet to speak anything, but what God put in his mouth. That was a repeated blessing on the covenant people of God, whom the king wanted cursed.

Since Balaam could not curse the Hebrews, he turned to political compromise and gave counsel that caused Israel to sin against the Lord. And how did it end?

The prestige and popularity was meaningless and the gold soon was gone. Balaam was slain a short time later by the Hebrews in a battle against enemy forces with which he aligned himself. Num. 31. But the prophet does get worldly immortality which most would not want. He is mentioned in the Bible some 59 times including the epistles of Peter and Jude as well as Revelation. All are warnings of a way of life to shun.

Modern disciples should consider well the life, deeds, and end of this prophet who wanted to be God's man, but loved the world and things of it. Often it appears that the norm in modern discipleship is for church members to avoid study, meditation, and love of the Word, but practice a form of ritualistic, powerless religion. The end of that lifestyle is one of shame, and it is not new. It is spiritual nonsense, and has a predictable end based on precedents recorded in Holy Writ.

FOR THOUGHT: How important is it to you that church activities be soundly supported by the Bible?

Do you think many modern disciples would abandon discipleship if offered large sums of money, power or prestige to take another direction in life?

Could it be that many disciples fall to perceived pleasant temptations because they have failed to become well-grounded as a Christian? Explain your thoughts.

GOTTA HAVE IT TO HELP OTHERS

Mastery is required in most all important endeavors of production and service. Those who aspire to help others in health services, education, or in the production of marketable products must achieve high levels of understanding and skill to be successful. That is as it should be, but dare we think of Christianity in the same standards? Think with me a minute.

Jesus emphasized that His people were not to emulate the authority structures of the world, but to achieve greatness in humble service. Matt. 20:27. Accordingly, most folks are not prone to consider Christianity as a lifestyle of varying levels of skills, but the Word underscores that it is. Even the parable of the sower noted the fruit bearing as thirty, sixty, and one hundredfold. Matt. 13. Moreover, in the parable of the talents, some produced more than others, but each producer was commended. Matt. 25. The common factor in these two great parables of Christian service emphasize the value of preparation and skills. The foundation of initial repentance and faith must be accompanied by the mastery of salvation's purpose. Too many fail in matters of faith when they should be enjoying a high degree of success. Jesus revealed to the apostle Peter his essential need which was lacking at the time. Note Luke 22:32, *"But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren."* Certainly, Jesus was not referring here to the new birth of the spirit. It is clear that the apostles were saved men who were baptized by John the Baptist, but Jesus meant something quite specific by using the term "converted."

A quick referral to language lexicons reveals the term "converted" means "to turn around, to turn one's back to another person or thing, to turn one's self from one's course of conduct to another." The term is used in these contexts several times in the scriptures. It conveys the idea of growth in grace and knowledge to the point of being a workman who needs not to be ashamed or embarrassed, a high degree of understanding and skill in the discipline of the Word.

So just how may the modern Christian properly prepare himself to be helpful to others in matters of faith? Certainly not by being a pot that calls the kettle black or by offering to remove a splinter from another's eye when a post is in his own. Rather it is in the process of conversion. Saved folks certainly have their spirits sealed by the Holy Spirit unto the day of redemption, but the road to spiritual maturity is one of conversion from the ways of the world to the ways of the Lord in practical daily living. It is essential to rightfully help others.

FOR THOUGHT: The Christian life is really a work in progress, enduring for a lifetime. So, what degree of mastery do you think one must have to help others spiritually?

Do you believe that the more you learn about Bible teachings the greater your abilities will be to help others?

What does the Bible term "conversion" mean to you?

HOORAY, IT'S MOVING TIME!

As an adult, I have never enjoyed moving! The chore and emotional upheaval has been tolerated, even made the best of, but enjoyed? No! Perhaps shirkers, free-loaders, fly-by-nighters, etc. find some enjoyment in it, but even that is doubtful. Some are tickled if they are "moving on up on the eastside," but even then, the mundane, emotional experience takes its toll. So, why would anyone say, "Hooray, it's moving time?" Think with me a minute!

Consider that the move is one of permanency, of total and lasting benefit, of change in person as well as environment. Now that would be a different matter altogether. Moreover, such a move has been made, and continues to be made by millions.

By the grace of God, men may move out of sin and death into righteousness and life. The opportunity remains open to this very day to everyone because they are the biblical "whosoever." I speak of spiritual salvation through which one may move from sin by trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ as personal Savior. That move is permanent! John 3:16.

As a saved person, one then has the privilege to move into covenant relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ as His disciple. This is accomplished through the obedience of baptism and fellowship in His church. Then, one day such a person will have the privilege of moving on up to glory to his eternal home. What a day that will be! The prospects of it makes one want to shout, "Hooray, it is moving time!"

This is moving out of darkness into His marvelous light! It is moving out of condemnation into the righteousness of Christ Jesus. This is moving out of spiritual ignorance into the enlightenment of spiritual knowledge and maturity. John 3:19-21. In short, it is hearing the call of the Master and positively responding to that call of salvation, service, blessings, and peace! John 11:28.

"O, soul, are you weary and troubled? No light in the darkness you see? There is light for a look at the Savior, and life more abundant and free. Turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in His wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace." Say, what about you, dear reader? Is it moving time?

FOR THOUGHT: How many times have you moved your residence? Was it fun? What is the most uncomfortable thing about moving?

Does moving disturb your comfort zone? How does that translate into spiritual decisions?

Is moving less stressful if someone else does all the work for us? How does that idea help our spiritual decisions?

HOW ARE YOU RUNNING?

A popular topic of news and conversation these days has to do with running. From local 10K runs to regional and national marathons, the young, the healthy, and the athletically inclined fill events with gusto and expectations; some to win, some to improve on their own time, yet others to simply finish the course. It is interesting to note that the Bible has much to say about running as well. However, the topic in biblical context is not a physical race, but a spiritual one. Think with me!

The church at Corinth was told, *“Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run that ye may obtain.”* 1 Cor. 9:24. Proper interpretation here demands strict adherence to context. It is the aggregate of the church under consideration. There exists under the umbrella of “Christianity” a large number of churches with vastly diverse beliefs and purposes. They, with many numbered among the true churches, are all considered runners. But it is the disciplined disciples adhering to the faith once delivered to the saints that will receive the commendation of the Master and its attendant prize.

Attention is now turned to Hebrews 12:1, which alludes to the great crowd of witnesses in Chapter Eleven. In view of those heroes of faith, the admonition is, *“. . . Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. . . .”*

A race, by its very nature is a competitive event, testing durability. Is not a physical foot race challenging and difficult? Then how much more the spiritual race. Yet, some seem so willing to drop out at the slightest bump in the road. Winning disciples of the Lord are enveloped in practical running, fully realizing the race is not in the future, but it is currently on! How are you running?

FOR THOUGHT: A race is not only competitive; it requires certain requisites of participants. What do you think are the requirements of runners in the Christian race? List some of the common “weights” the Christian must lay aside to be successful runners.

HOW DO I WORSHIP WITH MY MONEY

“And here men that die receive tithes; but there he receiveth them, of whom it is witnessed that he liveth.” Hebrews 7:8.

What responsibility does a Christian have in the use of his money? This is an oft asked question, especially in lessons and discussions of stewardship. It is asked because there are tangential extremes that invariably get thrown into the verbal mix.

In Old Testament times, God demanded a tenth of one's increase, even the first fruits of man, beast, the fields, orchards, and vineyards. Wealth or lack thereof was not taken into consideration, except in the offerings in which the poor could offer birds instead of beasts. Under the New Testament era of grace, God's people have not received less, but more responsibility, all within the realm of spiritual maturity rather than demand.

But modern times have produced their own extremities. On one hand, some would have us to always study to boycott companies that sell what we need when those companies use their profits wrongly. I do not accept that responsibility unless the evil is blatant. I cannot be responsible for what others do with their money. I have enough trouble governing my own decisions.

On the other hand, one should be aware of his responsibility to use money wisely. It is hard to claim that there is no money for God's work when one is spending God's money (Yes, your money is God's money that you would not have unless He blessed you with the health and ability to earn it.) for alcohol, tobacco, gambling, and other vices that are a blight on society. Moreover, what does the widow who gave her last two mites to the work of God say to us? Anything???

Furthermore, it is not the church super-structural programs, but the local, New Testament churches that should be the object of concern in wise stewardship. After all it is not the tele-evangelist, the cooperative programs, or self-styled religious programs that visit you in the hospital, conduct funerals, deliver God's messages in sermon, song, Bible study, and in property maintenance commensurate to worship services. It is the local church which provides these ministries. It is worthy of the support of all its members. Maintaining it is giving to God and accepted as such. Personally, I am careful how I spend my money, and more careful how and where I give it. Every action undertaken by a church that requires money should be done at the authorization of the church and shared as equally as possible by all the membership. It is not a good thing for church members to fill the coffers of their church with no plan for the use of the money beyond the basic, weekly budget of the church. Doing so has tempted and led many into extra-scriptural social programs that detract from its God-given mission in the long run. But giving to the need and mission of the church when done cheerfully, from the heart, is acceptable to God.

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think there is a difference in attitudes among many Christians today about giving? For instance, the Pharisees dropping bags of gold into the coffers of the Temple may have been simply fulfilling obligation, but the widow casting in her last two mites must surely have done so from her heart. How will that play out in judgment?

Some tithe, but never do anything more, feeling it should now be the obligation of the church. How do you feel about that?

HOW DOES A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH ORIGINATE?

Church and state is an entirely different thing to religion and state. However, the unscriptural doctrine of universal, invisible church has been in place in the religious world for so long (since the Protestant Reformation) that most people in Protestant churches and those in government do not know the difference. Additionally, terrible things happen when the government shows favoritism to a literal, visible church or denomination of churches. Furthermore, tax favoritism toward churches has motivated less than honorable men to use such laws to create organizations for fiduciary benefits to themselves. They will tell those under the blinders of their charade to send their money to God, and, oh, yes, here is his address. With increasing, tax-free funds they build their little empires of multiple mansions, yachts, and airplanes. The increased number and variety of such religious organizations succeed in further blurring the perceptible lines between church and religion. So, one may ask if there really is an important difference, and if so, just how does a New Testament church originate?

Here is how. Having the prerequisites of personal salvation and John's baptism, men and women may covenant together to carry out the terms of the Great Commission. Matthew 28:18-20. Ideally, under the express will of an established New Testament church that is able to oversee, comfort, and encourage the new congregation. This is succession. It is the New Testament pattern. It is the only pattern acceptable to New Testament churches in their missionary efforts. Some in the theological world may "guffaw" at the idea of church succession, but that is their problem. Jesus promised it, historians confirm it, and the meaning of the Word of God is found faulty and meaningless if it is not so. So soon will the bride of Christ, His church, which has sailed through bloody seas, without mercy from the emissaries of Satan, be welcomed, and rewarded by its soon coming king.

Of course, there are those who would be quick to levy the charge of "legalism" to such rigid thinking, but it is not. It is understanding the New Testament pattern while also understanding that Jesus did not give anyone the authority to, or pronounce any blessings on those who would, change the Word of God to fit their own human thinking, or to placate a sinful world.

On a personal level, let it be known that it is a terrible thing for an eternity-bound image of Almighty God to trust his eternal state to the thinking of others, fully as much a sinner as he, instead of the pure light of the Word. If I were a blind man, I would not want to trust the safety of my travel, or the arrival to my proper destination, to another blind man.

FOR THOUGHT: Under the laws of the nation, anyone may start a religious organization and be granted tax-free status, but does that make it a New Testament church? Why? Why not? List at least two requirements of individuals who may wish to form a New Testament church.

HOW MUCH LIKE JESUS SHOULD A MODERN CHRISTIAN BECOME?

It is interesting to note that in modern Israel only about 10% are of the orthodox Jewish persuasion. Most claim no religion at all, and many are outright atheists. This may be shocking to some, but it is true. Comparing the stats to Christianity in America, of all “Christian” denominations combined, less than 15% are practicing Christians enough to be found in church on Sunday morning. Far less than that would make up conservative, serious Bible believing Christians. So, in a land and in a time when the Christian vogue appears to be to “see how far away from Bible teaching may one get, and still be thought of as a Christian,” just how much like Jesus should one become, and could that happen without being labeled as radical? Think about it!

Once a preacher preached fervently that all men are sinners. He was labeled as a misanthrope. Then he preached on salvation by grace through faith plus nothing. He was labeled as a heretic of easy religion. He preached on the importance and blessing of deep-water baptism. He was labeled as a legalistic Campbellite. So, he preached on the absolute necessity of the virgin birth of Christ. He was labeled as a Catholic. Next, he preached on eternal security of the believer. He was labeled as a Calvinistic predestinarian. Then he preached on the local church only being the highest echelon of Biblical authority among men. He was labeled as a religious bigot. Finally, he preached on joy in the Holy Spirit. He was quickly labeled as a Charismatic Pentecostal. Well, it did not end there, but thankfully neither did the readiness of that preacher to preach the Word. He understood that everybody wants to put the preacher in their particular box, and if one boldly preaches the Word, criticism will come, no matter what subject is chosen.

God’s people must stop reading into the Word their peculiar notions, and instead read out of the Word what it is saying. The plea of the scriptures is to *“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus...”* Philippians 2:5. That simply means to be motivated by the thought patterns of Christ Jesus; to reverence the Word as did Christ Jesus, and always be truthful in sharing the Word, as did Christ Jesus.

Furthermore, modern disciples are not left to deal with the Bible as an open-ended document, but to exercise the mind of Christ, which His people of covenant possess and are to teach to others. I Cor. 2:14. In doing this, His people will become of one mind in spiritual matters as they are so often admonished in the New Testament.

If this writer is simple minded or narrow minded, so be it. It just seems so very clear from Jesus’ prayer in John 17-18, that He wants His people to be unified with His mindset as revealed in the Word. That being said, it is apparent that it is far better to see how close to the scriptures one can live his life rather than how far away from the scriptures he can drift, and still be considered a Christian.

FOR THOUGHT: The world has reduced the idea of Christianity to being no more than a civic club. Do you think Jesus will approve such subverting of His church, His Word? Why? If one is as serious as he should be about his relationship with Christ, he can expect criticism. Do you think a Christian should modify his faith to avoid criticism, or double down on it as a testimony to others?

HOW TO BE CLOSE TO GOD

The question is oft asked, "How may I be close to God?" I am sure there are many answers depending upon whom is asked. So, I dare to answer that question.

First, it should be noted, the reason why God came into the world in the form of the man Jesus. Hebrews 10:5-7 states, *"Wherefore when he cometh into the world, he saith, 'Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not, but a body hast thou prepared me: In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin thou has had no pleasure. Then said I, Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me,) to do they will, O God.'"*

"To do the will of God!" Now that we have the reason, we must know where He is, and make the necessary move to be where He is. James 4:8 emphasizes this point, *"Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners, and purify your hearts, ye double minded."*

Where was God in the Old Testament times? He dwelt in the Holy of Holies of the tabernacle. So, what was in that place that He should dwell there? Simply put, it was the Ark of the Covenant. What covenant? The covenant of His Word with His people Israel, involving the terms of His relationship with them.

Well, just what was in the Ark of the Covenant that He so respected and dwelt there? The answer is in Hebrews 9:4. It was the golden pot of manna, Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of covenant written in stone. These three items in the Ark of the Covenant are representative of (1) the provisions of God, (2) the authority of God, and (3) the Word of God. In these God is pleased to dwell always.

So where is He in New Testament times? He dwells in (1) the fleshed-out image of His invisible being, Jesus, the only begotten Son of God. Hebrews 1:1-3; (2) He dwells in His church, the pillar and ground of the truth, and the body of which He is the Head; Acts 1:1, Timothy 3:15; (3) He dwells in the heart of penitent people who learn His Word and who follow it. Hebrew 13:5.

So, what is seen in both Old and New Testaments but the provisions of God, the authority of God, and the Word of God. Where those things are, and are respected, one will find, and be close to God. The more one turns attention to these things, and disciplines himself to live in them, the more he will realize the presence of God and the marvel of His righteous work among men. There is no place so good, and with benefits here and hereafter than being close to God; and He made a way for every one of us to be there.

FOR THOUGHT: How does the command in James 4:8 and lesson of the provisions of the Ark of the Covenant connect?

If God is pleased to dwell where his provisions, authority, and word are, do you think it possible to be close to God outside of that dwelling? Why?

How do you see modern churches paying attention to these three things?

HOW TO HAVE A BLESSED LIFE

In these last days of the age, lives often display a considerable amount of oxymoronic confusion. That is, what we say and what we do are often contradictory. For instance, everybody wants to go to heaven, but few want to go to worship services. Everybody wants to be rich, but few want to work. Everybody wants to have friends, but few are willing to initiate friendliness. The list could go on. This underscores the point of this article. Everybody wants to be blessed, but few will initiate steps of progress to have a blessed life.

So, what are those steps that should be initiated in order to have a blessed life? Perhaps it would be helpful to note what no small number of folks have pursued only to be disappointed. Some lock in on higher education. Others see a blessed life as being financially wealthy, and all other things in life are viewed as a means to that end. To others it is mastery in some art or science. Still others think a blessed life is to be found in the acquisition of power, popularity, or authority. Any one of these, or all of them together, are roads to failure in the pursuit of a blessed life. It is not that many of these things are wrong or sinful in themselves, but they must be subjugated to the will and Word of God to fulfill their purpose for existence.

Again, what are the steps to a blessed life? How is it to be identified? It seems more than logical that the Creator of all things should be consulted for a correct definition. In the introductory message contrasting Old Covenant tenants to the New Testament, Jesus was, in the great Sermon on the Mount, plainly spelling it out to His church. Then let that be heard again. In Matt. 5 He said:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

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.”

Is this different to the world? Yes, indeed, but it is undisputedly the blessed life!

FOR THOUGHT: Which of the above beatitudes have you experienced as a Christian?

Do you think a believer may have a blessed life by experiencing none of the above?

Does the reality of Christianity presented by Jesus seem widely different to what is commonly heard and/or practiced in most churches today? Explain what you mean.

I WOULD GIVE ANYTHING IF . . .

“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:” I Peter 1:18-19.

How many times has it been heard: “I would give anything if . . .?” A traveler stopped by a beautiful orchard to purchase some of its luscious fruit. He exclaimed to the orchard owner, “I would give anything if I could grow fruit like this!” “You certainly can!”, replied the orchard owner, “but it takes time and a lot of hard work. The trees have to be planted and given time to grow. They must be fertilized, watered, and pruned.” That seems to be the barrier for most wishful thinkers. A church member once told this writer, “I would give anything to know the Bible as you do!” The reply was simple. You certainly can. God is no respecter of persons. If you will read the Bible, study and pray every day, spend several years in seminary, then add to it several decades of additional study and presentations, it will happen! “No way!” said the would-be Bible expositor. On another occasion, someone said, “I would give a thousand dollars if I could play the piano like your daughter does!” The reply was quick. “Cheapskate! It cost me a lot more than a mere thousand dollars and it cost her many years of hard consistent practice.”

The world is filled with the wishful thinkers who would give anything if . . . However, that which is prized is associated with great cost. This is exactly why the prized possibility of spiritual salvation, and an eternity in heaven, comes at the greatest of all possible costs, but it is the work of the benefactor, not the beneficiary. God so loved the world that He would give anything to redeem it to Himself, and that is just what it cost Him: Himself! The very Creator God found it necessary to affix His own eternal destiny with that of mankind if there were to be any possibility of redemption. To that end He became one of us, and although He knew no sin, He became sin for us, and paid a debt He did not owe for one we could not pay. What an honor then it is to be born from above, to be a true Christian, a child of the King, a part of His bride, the pillar and ground of the truth. Would you give anything for that? Then that is just what it will cost. Give Him yourself in repentance and faith, and know that you are no longer your own, but are bought with a price, even the sacrificial blood of heaven’s dearest!

FOR THOUGHT: What value could be placed on the price God paid for man’s redemption? If redemption is not by gold, silver, or man’s wisdom, what is the price paid for your salvation? Could there be a bigger fool than one who gains the whole world, but loses his own soul? Would you really give anything, if . . .?

IDENTIFYING ANTICHRIST

“Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time.” 1 John 2:18.

Although I do not remember it, my first appearance in church was at the age of two-weeks. Reared to be in church every Sunday, often involved a considerable amount of conversation about antichrist in those days both in and out of worship services. Antichrist was always identified as one individual whose spirit dominated the government. The gas and sugar rationing stamps of early WWII was surely the mark of the beast, and if they were not, social security numbers surely were. Those reflections promote smiles, but there is also a lot of heartfelt thankfulness that my family and others in the community were concerned enough with life, and the Bible to make such conversations. Presently, it just seems appropriate to review some of the things they did not know.

Like “baptism” the term “Christ” is a Greek word transliterated into English. Also, “Messiah” is a Hebrew word transliterated into English. Both are translated as “anointed.” So, to say “anti-messiah” or “antichrist” is to say in English “anti-the-anointed.” The understanding of “anointed” is that it is the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit of God.

This runs deep into Hebrew history. The anointing of the Holy Spirit was a special empowerment bestowed upon high priests, prophets, and kings. It allowed those individuals to perform their God-given tasks correctly and appropriately. It could be bestowed, and it could be removed without reference to the new birth as exemplified by King Saul. It drove David into deep prayer that it might not happen to him. That empowerment continued in special contexts in the New Testament.

Jesus is the anointed (Christ) of God, and He is the Head of the body. His anointing was accomplished at his baptism. Moreover, as it was appropriate for the Head of the body to be anointed, so it is appropriate for the body of the Head to be anointed. The man Jesus was ceremonially anointed at His baptism, and His body on earth was anointed on the Day of Pentecost. So, please consider what all that means.

In the days of the Apostle John, there were already many antichrists. 1 John 2:18. They denied our Lord and His holy faith. Over the last two millennia, their kind has multiplied exponentially. John went on to use the term “antichrist” four more times in his epistles where it is confined in the Bible (in word, not in subject matter).

In the understanding that the head of the body (Jesus) also anointed the body of the Head (the church), an expanded viewpoint of “antichrist” is underscored. Consider that those who are opposed to the teaching of the New Testament are antichrist to the one who gave us the Word. Moreover, they are antichrist or anti-anointed in belief and action toward those who are anointed as the pillar and ground of the truth, the true New Testament church of our Lord. Here then, is the spirit of those John identified as antichrists in his day, and of those who have opposed the anointed body of the anointed Head down through the centuries. Such are truly antichrist. Their spirit will be the same spirit that ushers in the man of sin, the son of perdition, in the very last days.

FOR THOUGHT: Two entities were anointed in the New Testament: Jesus at His baptism, and His church at Pentecost. The church, His body, is under heavy mandate to follow Jesus’ teachings set forth in the New Testament. Does it make sense that to be against one is really to be against both, and such warrants the label, “antichrist?”

The spirit of antichrist is rampant these last days, but do you believe that there will come one man who will be known as Antichrist?

IN HIS STEPS

Throughout the land a cry is heard in ever increasing intensity as the pain of predominant iniquity and evil seems to grow ever stronger. It is the anguish of truth rejected, of time-honored principles spurned, and of sin reigning from cottage to palace, from homes to educational institutions, to governments. It is a cry of spiritual warfare from saints who are predestined to be overcome even as they, themselves, become overcomers from the hell-bound quagmire of Christ-rejecting societies. Think with me for a moment.

The cry is not a new thing, neither is its cause. Rather it is a repetitious story of mankind in his fallen state. Consider that as far back as King David and beyond, the cry, and its cause, claimed national attention. The Psalmist declared in 2:1-2, *"Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together against the LORD, [Jehovah/Jesus] and against his anointed, [His true church] saying, Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us."* Truth cramps the style of the wayward whose fixation on sin and self bears them swiftly through the wide gate and down the broad way.

Israel's looming destruction by the Babylonians led Jeremiah to cry out, *"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.'"* Jeremiah 6:16.

From time immemorial the best way to go with the fewest harmful obstacles is the old, proven, time-honored path. Spiritually, this is the time-honored truth of God and His Word that provide a lamp for the feet, and a light for the way. It is the good way of peace. Let me illustrate with childhood experience.

The summertime found most children barefoot, if not from necessity, at least by choice. Walking the pastures of the countryside, one might easily be injured by briars and other obstacles so environmentally common. However, the pastures where cattle grazed would always afford a well-worn, smooth path from its remote ends to the barn with its bovine provisions. Choosing that path in the pasture was a no-brainer.

The conclusion is inescapable. We are not called to be trailblazers, but to walk in the path so expertly set for us. Trailblazers fail every time. Only one was qualified to blaze the trail for the saints: Christ Jesus. Peter put it well in 2:21 of his first epistle, *"For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow in his steps."* Why don't you quit trying to blaze your own trail and walk in the peace and promise of His!

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think some people want to be trailblazers in life, rather than walk in proven, time-honored paths because they have too much sinful ego? What else?

Hiking in a forest, would you rather walk in a cleared pathway or in the briars, rocks, and other entanglements? If the former, why would the forest of religion be preferred over the Bible?

What do you think about the rage of the heathen in Psalm 2:1-2?

INSTRUCTIONS? THERE ARE INSTRUCTIONS?

"Hey, dad! I just bought this. It is all in the box. Will you put it together for me?" Well, of course, dad would be happy to do that. After all, he has a tendency to love construction and mechanics of various sorts. Whether it is a bookcase, desk, what-not, or other "do-it-yourself" item, dad is fully confident. After all, it is fairly simple, and what could go wrong? Oh, brother! How many readers have been in these shoes!

So, in full confidence, the work begins. As the project nears an end, the last few pieces just do not seem to fit. Perhaps the manufacturer forgot to drill holes in the right place. Perhaps they made a mistake in their quality control and boxed the wrong pieces. It is then that someone suggests that it might be helpful if the instructions were consulted. "Instructions? There are instructions?" Sure enough, the wrong pieces were used early on. Now, there is just one thing to do. Take it apart so it can be put together correctly. In the country that was called "licking your calf all over again!" So much for the zealous confidence!

It occurs to this writer that multitudes of people approach religion in the very same way. They are confident that God will be pleased with whatever they do, believe, and teach, because they are sincere, and humanly speaking, mean well. After all, parents did this, friends do this, "churches" and "pastors" do this, so it must be right. In every case, the wrong people are consulted and followed. The Bible term for this sort of "Christianity" is "iniquity."

What is worse, many will not find out just how great their wasted life cost them until they stand before the Judge of all men. How much better it is to consult the instructions! God did not leave mankind without instructions. It is called the Holy Bible. It does not agree with the sinful nature of unrepentant men, many churches, and many pastors, but it brings unparalleled joy and peace to the repentant who look to it as the final authority and take its instructions to heart.

Say! What kind of life are you building? Is it full speed ahead in full confidence in the flesh, in self, in some religious leader? The wisest thing you will do in life is consult God's instruction book of life in detail, and often. The life it builds for you will be right, rewarded, and accepted by the Creator/Savior/Judge! Paul told Timothy and therefore us all, *"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 Timothy 3:16-17. When the short span of life is over on earth, works are then all finished no matter how right or wrong, and there is no taking it apart to start over again. . . and . . . Eternity . . . is a very long time!

FOR THOUGHT: Why do you think people tend to ignore instructions?

Think of four reasons people give for not reading the Bible?

On a far journey, a map is most helpful. Is not the journey of life more important, and in greater need of an instructive map?

Could it be that topwater religions have lured people into thinking God is really an advanced man who will understand and ignore our failures? Is this what "A God of Love" means?

IS LIFE TOO MUCH?

"There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it." I Corinthians 10:13.

"That is just too much," said the crippled man with a pinball machine strapped to his back. His was a justified complaint, but nowadays complaints of life flood society from every corner. Increased luxuries of the 21st Century have brought more than their share of increased duties and responsibilities, without stretching the day beyond the common 24 hours. It is just too much!

Under modern pressures fully half of marriages will end in divorce. Country and Western singers belt out their moaning of "Make the World Go Away," "Take This Job and Shove It," etc. as the rat race becomes a rat trap. Where is all the goodness of the success ladder when each rung of it is hollow as soon as achieved? So, suicides increase, drug use and alcohol consumption skyrockets, and counsellors need counselling.

Sometimes, it is helpful to know that some of God's greatest people have felt such pressures and frustrations. Moses complained to God, *"Wherefore hast thou afflicted thy servant? . . . have I conceived all this people . . . I am not able to bear all this people alone, because it is too much for me"* Num. 11:11-14.

Elijah buckled under threats from Jezebel, and Jeremiah was frustrated over fruitless ministry to an impenitent people, Jer. 9:12. So, as it was with the ancients, it is with modern man. Life is declared to be just too much. But life in its proper perspective is never really too much. When life with all its responsibilities and duties are subordinated to God, and when He is the primary resource, one never has to throw up hands and declare, "It's just too much!"

Of course, there are those who would be quick to say that faith is a crutch. Well, that is O.K., too. I freely admit to needing one. I find my Lord Jesus and His blessed Word of life to be infinitely better than illicit sex, alcohol, drugs, suicide, and all the other similar vices to which men turn when under pressure, or not under pressure.

As of this date, the Bible records the trail of men for six thousand years. Every historical record of it is accurate. Every prophecy is exactly true. Having read the last chapter of the book, I know how it is all going to end. Furthermore, from the view that it presents of the end time, and the eternal status of the soul, it is inconceivable that one would willingly ignore the preparations it affords every never-dying soul. Thinking of being without Christ Jesus both here and especially in eternity is the one thing that should make every offspring of Adam say, "Now that is the thing that is just too much!"

FOR THOUGHT: Have you ever been so pressed by temptations that you thought it too much? What does the Bible mean when it says we will not be tempted more than we can bear? Does God take away temptations, or do people ignore their exit signs? Why would a believer turn to the common vices of sin when under pressure?

IS THERE REALLY A NEW TESTAMENT PRIESTHOOD?

Most everyone knows there was the Aaronic priesthood in the Old Testament. In modern times the Catholic Church and some Protestant churches host priesthoods, but the term is not so much heard in Baptist circles. Still, there definitely is priesthood in Baptist churches, but not as those appearing in the aforementioned churches. Please consider this matter with me.

The Hebrew term "priest" is "cohen," which basically means to serve God particularly in religious affairs on behalf of oneself as well as others. Principally, priests were to study the Word of God, then teach and administer the Word of God to, or for, others in total accordance with that Word. When one thinks of Old Testament priests, the idea of animal sacrifices comes to mind. They did this, but much more. Sacrifices were to be offered at the Temple in Jerusalem, but a community of priests existed in every tribe of Israel for the purpose of standing for, and teaching to others, the Word. Old Testament priests served under a high priest, who alone could offer the "Day of Atonement" sacrifice on behalf of the nation. In an attempt to emulate that pattern, Catholic, and some Protestant priests serve under an earthly high priest in a sort of hierarchy. For Catholics it is the Pope. For Anglicans, it is the Archbishop of Canterbury. They even go so far as to absolve the guilt of sin for their parishioners.

However, as we seek the biblical pattern, we learn that the New Testament churches are indeed New Testament priests, not just the preacher or pastor, but every member. The apostle Peter puts it this way in I Peter 2:5, *"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."* According to the New Testament, some, but not all, of those sacrifices include our bodies as living sacrifices, Romans 12:1-4, and the praise of our lips, Heb. 13:15. Certainly, it is the commission of the New Testament churches of priests to win men to Jesus, baptize them, and teach them all things Christ commanded. Matt. 28:18-20. This is a perpetual service on earth. Moreover, the New Testament priesthood serves under the one and only approved High Priest, even Jesus, as is taught in Hebrews 3:1; 4:14,15; 5:1,5,10; 6:20; 7:26; 8:1,3; 9:7,11,25; 10:21.

Every person who has repented of sins and received Christ Jesus as his personal Lord and Savior, then followed Him in deep water baptism upon the authority of one of His priestly churches, has been admitted into the New Testament priesthood. Such ones serve and are accountable to the one and only High Priest, even Jesus. A good church and a good pastor will watch out for the wellbeing of one another in the service of this priesthood, but it **MUST** be understood that accountability is to the High Priest, and that day of joy or sorrow will come. II Cor. 5:10. What a true joy it is to serve as a New Testament priest under the High Priest, Jesus. Every person on earth should respond positively to the longsuffering of our High Priest by seizing upon this grand opportunity.

FOR THOUGHT: If every New Testament church member is a priest of God, what are some of the sacrifices he is to be offering?

Who is the high priest of the Lord's churches?

Is the pastor of a church to be considered its priest alone? Why? Why not?

JUST A LITTLE MORE SLEEP

Sleep was created for earthly life as the means of necessary refreshment to the body. Blessed are those who are able to sleep six to eight hours each night; but cursed are those whose goal is to sleep life away during both day and night. Doubtless the sleep of a laboring man is sweet, as said by the wise man, Solomon, but those who sleep in the affairs of life can expect poverty and loss. Let's think about it!

Just what is this sleep in the affairs of life? It may be identified as one's personal comfort zone. It is the nature of the flesh to create a comfort zone, and to disdain any call to consider things that might endanger that insulation to the affairs of life. That is sleep. Through such sleep, fortunes have been lost, businesses gone bankrupt, and lives shipwrecked. The Bible underscores this important principle. Consider that it was while they slept that the Midianites were suddenly put to flight by the small band of Gideon. It was while men slept that the Medes and Persians brought an end to Babylon, the first great, world empire. It was while men slept that an enemy sowed tares among the wheat in the parables of Jesus. Moreover, it will be while men sleep that the bridegroom (Jesus) comes, and many will not be ready to meet Him.

Solomon said, *"How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? When wilt thou arise out of thy sleep?"* Prov. 6:9. He went on to say, *"Love not sleep, lest thou come to poverty; open thine eyes, and thou shalt be satisfied with bread."* 20:13. Modern times have underscored just how easy it is for individuals and churches to sleep when they should be swimming upstream in holy proclamations of salvation and the soon-coming King of Kings! One might name many reasons why this condition exists, but none of them are acceptable excuses for it.

So, what will we find in the New Testament regarding this specific subject? A quick survey shows much. Let us hear Paul as he admonished the Romans, *"And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed."* Rom. 13:11. Similarly, he taught the Thessalonians, *"Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober."* 1 Thess. 5:6. God's people are not children of the night, but the children of the day. They are to be awake, alert, watchful, and understanding of what and why things are happening. In so doing, the example of our Lord will be followed. One may be sure that "He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep." Psalm 121. Are you a "ho-hum, you're okay, I'm okay," kind of person, or are you awake, discerning the signs of the time in accordance with the Word, and listening for the shout?

FOR THOUGHT: The sleep that is condemned in the Bible is not the necessary restoration of the body, but mental and spiritual sleep to harmful principles and wickedness of the world. That being said, name a few things today to which men appear to be asleep.

What does "open thine eyes, and thou shalt be satisfied with bread" mean?

How would you define the life of a person who is wide awake? One who is asleep?

JUST SLAP THE NEXT LITTLE BOY!

It seems the more affluent society becomes, the more we become strangers to one another. Privacy is prized, right and wrong are rationalized on the basis of personality instead of principle, and selfishness among people with things ever increases. "What is wrong for everyone else may be right for me," seems to be a widespread rationalization. It is not a flattering commentary on 21st century America, but it is largely accurate.

A recent story illustrates the point. A lady enrolled her son in school following a move to a Midwestern town. She told the teacher that her son was an especially good child. However, she said in case he did misbehave, the teacher should just slap the little boy next to him and he would straighten up right away.

Truly, the annals of history abound with skewed, selfish attitudes, and the terrible end each reaped as a result. Nebuchadnezzar had to run with cattle for years to gain the right attitude. Pharaoh got to see his nation brought to ruin, and its army destroyed. Haman was privileged to be hanged on his own gallows he had prepared for the execution of others. Herod was eaten by worms. On and on the stories go, and why is it so? Why are these annals of history preserved? The answer is loud and clear, and found in I Cor. 10:11, "*Now all these things happened unto them for examples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.*" It is specifically stated in verse six of that chapter, "*Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted.*"

The God Who is no respecter of persons makes it plain that responsibility for actions or lack thereof lies squarely on the individual. Selfishness, greed, envy, and every other sin will reap its just reward, and there will be no skewed rationale for blaming someone else. The straight-line approach of God's judgments will not be bent for anyone. This is underscored in the matter of a personal relationship one is to have with the only begotten Son of God. How do you fit into this line of thinking?

FOR THOUGHT: Do people still want to blame others for their own failures?

If men are not supposed to learn from others, why is the Old Testament preserved?

What is wrong with the value system of anyone who would delight in another being punished for his own mistakes?

KANGAROOS CAN'T EAT JUST ONE

While carrying out the objectives of a mission trip to Australia some years ago, a little time was taken when convenient to see some sights and get a thorough feel for the country. One brief aside found us in a drive-through zoo near the city of Sydney. One area was a walk through and featured such lovely animals as the koalas and kangaroos. The koala's diet is strictly the leaves of the Eucalyptus tree, so while admiring the little creatures, there was no feeding them.

On the other hand, kangaroos will eat quite a number of things, and tourists were allowed to feed them a small amount of approved food. Laura had a small bag of potato chips and found that they really liked them. While feeding one momma kangaroo, she exhausted the bag, but Mrs. Roo was not satisfied. So, she grabbed Laura's arm with her small paws, leaned back on her huge tail and soundly kicked her with large back feet, though not too forcefully. The fright of it all lasted only a moment, and immediately gave way to laughter, and referencing the popular pun of the day, "No one can eat just one," to which we added, "Even a kangaroo!"

Over the years, the incident evoked joy and laughter, but a great spiritual lesson, too. How good is the feeling of forgiveness, and how sweet is the Word of God. When first feeding upon it, the newborn child of God wants more, and more. The psalmist cried, "*How sweet are thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth.*" Psalm 119:103.

Paul told the Corinthians that they should, "*As newborn babes desire the sincere milk of the word.*" But it is not to stop there. The time had come when many should have been eating the meat of the Word, but being unable to do so, still needed the milk.

History records so many of the Anabaptists, called Waldenses, and others, too, who memorized, and could quote perfectly, entire books of the Bible. It was so precious to them.

Alas! Modern Christians may possess multiple copies of the entire Bible but be unfamiliar with their eternal content. It must not be forgotten that every member of the human family is racing pell-mell to meet his maker; to judgment of life based entirely upon the instructions of Holy Writ. The blessed ones are, and will be, those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. Similar to the kangaroo of so long ago, we must not be satisfied with one verse, or one chapter, or one book. We need the whole thing. So, open the book, please! Pass me the knowledge of "Thus saith the Lord!"

FOR THOUGHT: Remember as a new Christian how you wanted to know more and more about the vast pool of Bible knowledge? What happens to that desire?

When the Bible ceases to appeal to the believer, what has happened to him spiritually?

Do you see people seeking to satisfy spiritual needs with human bologna?

KEEP IT SIMPLE, SIMON

“For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” Gal. 5:14.

How many Bible instructions are there for spiritual people to absorb on Christian Maturity Road? Actually, there are sixty-six books of it that comprise the Holy Bible. If a disciple of the Lord has not spent a few hours in each of them (not that that is sufficient), he is falling woefully short of Christian responsibility. That being said, it is still awesome that God’s expectations of His people are correctly condensed to a precious, few words. Think with me about this marvelous reality!

Solomon said, *“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.”* Ecc. 12:13. Certainly, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and keeping His commandments involves much study to know and understand them. So that simple reduction is not simple, and it is not a reduction except in the number of words in the expression. Later, in the ministry of Jesus, He was asked about the greatest commandments. Jesus replied that the first is to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. He went on to say that the second was to love thy neighbor as thyself. Then, He concluded, *“On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”* Matt. 22:40. Still later, the apostle Paul told the churches of Galatia, *“For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.”* Gal. 5:14.

Most certainly, there is much to learn and deeply appreciate in the sixty-six books of Holy Writ. But it is wonderfully condensed both by Old Testament and New Testament writers as well as by Jesus, Himself. Learning the Word of God is the most important thing in life for every offspring of Adam, but while one may not be well versed in Moses, Job, the prophets, or Psalms, he can be confident in the golden rule, knowing that if in his heart he truly loves God, and does in fact love his neighbor as himself, he is walking in the smiles of God. For in these things all the other commandments find fulfillment.

Let us not be guilty, then, of laying burdens on men that they may not be capable of understanding in their present status. Instead, preachers and teachers should emphasize the common, condensed principles of right to them, as they are guided along in deeper matters on Christian Maturity Road. KISS: “keep it simple, Simon!”

FOR THOUGHT: It has been said that God’s plan of salvation is so simple, that not even a fool should err regarding it. Do you think that is so?

In light of scriptures used in this article, do you think serving God should be complicated?

May something profoundly important also be profoundly simple? Explain!

KILLING MOSES —WHY?

“And it came to pass by the way in the inn, that the Lord met him, and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet, and said, ‘Surely a bloody husband art thou to me.’” Exodus 4:24-25.

Moses was a man of many brushes with death. He was launched in a baby float to escape the death order of Pharaoh. Later, he had to flee Egypt to avoid retribution for a crime he had committed against an Egyptian taskmaster. When he returned under a heavenly commission to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt, they often threatened to stone him for the troubles he had supposedly brought upon them. Finally, and due to another sin, God gently took his life out of this world on the peaks of Mt. Pisgah. But there was another time of great significance. An angel of the Lord met Moses in the way with the purpose of killing him! What? Why? What is this?

Read about it in Exodus 4:24-26. Moses had married Zipporah in the wilderness of Sinai and had neglected to perform the token of the Abrahamic covenant on his son. Now, he was in the process of becoming the leader of his people, a representative of the God of heaven and earth to Pharaoh, and that while in neglect of the basic tenets of obedience to the Lord. It appears that Zipporah was none too happy about the whole ordeal, but she accomplished it, and the Lord allowed Moses to go on with his commissioned work.

This incident constitutes a biblical “slap in the face” to so many who brush off baptism as relatively unimportant, and/or an ordinance that may be performed by anyone in any way. Let it be noted that if it is in the Word of God, it is not unimportant.

The Hebrews in their wilderness journey have been referenced as “the church in the wilderness.” That is correct. Those folks were a saved family that grew into a nation. They yielded to the Lord their firstborn by applying the blood of the paschal lamb on their doorposts. They were baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea. Indeed, as most modern Baptists would say, they were a saved, baptized, called out assembly; hence, a church, although not a New Testament church.

So, the token of the covenant, the cutting away of flesh, was most important both to them, and to the heavenly Father from Whom it originated. In like manner, the token of New Covenant relationship with God (burial of the fleshly man) is vitally important today.

To be sure, one may be spiritually saved, and never be baptized, but in baptism one is raised to walk in newness of life, i.e., New Covenant life. One may never be a member of a bona fide New Testament church without it.

Finally, the Word teaches us that there were some who rejected the counsel of God against themselves, not being baptized of Him.” Luke 7:30. Moses' mistake nearly cost him his life. Saved people who do not have scriptural baptism today forfeit the reward of New Covenant life both here, and hereafter. Let's learn from Moses!

FOR THOUGHT: How does circumcision and baptism relate to the covenants of God?
Do you think an angel would have actually killed Moses had he refused?
Do you think believers today forfeit much reward of life by not submitting to proper baptism?

LABOR AND LIGHT

It is Labor Day weekend. A foreigner might get the wrong impression from the way our phrases and titles are framed. It is not a special day to labor, but a day to rest from labor and reflect on the blessings of labor, and the God-given ability to do it. There are similarities between labor and light that come to mind. Think about it!

God's people are to labor, in fact, with much difficulty, to have, and to walk in light, letting the light of their spiritual life shine in a darkened world. But we do not have a specific day set aside to just reflect on our Christian labor. Perhaps there is a reason for that. Perhaps it is because like resting from labor on Labor Day, we tend to cease from our Christian labor every day. Presently, the hourglass of time is fast running out of sand, and it is so important that spiritual labor be renewed. And just what might that be? Simply put, it is receiving light and walking in light. After all, "There's a call comes ringing over the restless wave: send the light, send the light!" Jesus is light, and He is life. The repetitive biblical admonition to all who call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ is to walk in light. It is there that we have fellowship with Him. It is there that our life reproves the darkness of sin and rebellion toward God. Moreover, we are not left to guess how such a walk is to be accomplished. David of old said, *"Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path."* Psalm 119:105. John put it this way in I John 1:6-7: *"If we say we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin."*

To walk (manner of lifestyle lived) necessitates action. Too many church members have made a profession of faith but are doing little to nothing as a laborer to advance in the light Jesus brought to men, and in which He continues to walk. How appropriate, then, it would be to not only be thankful for the ability to labor on this holiday, but to be thankful for the opportunity to labor spiritually; to walk in the light of truth as a workman who needs not to be ashamed, but who is able to rightly divide the word of truth.

FOR THOUGHT: How does the claim of light, and the absence of labor create a lie? What does walking in the light of the Son of God have to do with forgiveness from sin? In your words, what do light and labor have to do with each other?

LANDMARKS OF BAPTIST FAITH

Baptist Churches lay claim to continued existence since the days of the apostles. They are the only community of churches with such origin. They have not been called by the same name, but were known variously as Paterines, Novations, Paulicians, Albigenses, Waldensians, Petro-Brusians, Donatists, Anabaptists, etc. These names, and others, were put upon them, usually by the population of their location throughout the centuries. However, there is a common thread running through them all by which they are identified as one and the same people. That thread is a core of common beliefs. Recognizing that fact, scholars of various Protestant faiths, including Methodists, Episcopalian, Lutheran, and Catholic, too, have verified their continued existence since the apostles, and that those churches are the only community of churches which have never symbolized with Rome.

These churches were often nomadic of necessity because of persecution from the religious life of Rome, which was most zealous to unite all religions in the empire, or else put them out of business via taxation, confiscation of property, burning of houses of worship, imprisonment, and execution of the people espousing different views and practices.

There were things about them in different countries and in different times that were uncommon, but the common thread was there exemplified in a statement of Faith dated 1120 A.D. in THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCHES OF THE VALLEYS OF PIEDMONT, written in 1654 by Samuel Moreland.

The landmarks, which have always identified the people presently known as Baptists, who are the legitimate successors of those earlier named, but all of whom were generally known as Anabaptists, are 1) The depravity of the total man, that is, all of mankind are sinners by nature and practice; 2) Spiritual salvation is effected by grace through repentance and faith in Christ plus nothing else; 3) There is eternal security of the believer in Christ, since all who believe in Jesus as personal Savior are granted everlasting life; 4) Baptism is effected by total immersion in water of a professed believer by the authority of a bona fide New Testament Church.

Of course, there are quite a number of other doctrines which make up historic and modern confessions of faith. All of them are important, but those four core doctrines are consistently identified as present and foundational among the Lord's churches wherever, and whenever, they are found. They truly are landmarks of the first church and its successors.

Solomon said it well in Proverbs 22:18, *"Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set."* Today, a shallow people are giving way to marginalization by the world's humanistic religions. Let the wisdom of Solomon be heard, for when the landmarks are gone, the ship of church is perished.

FOR THOUGHT: Look up Ephesians 3:21 and Matthew 28:20. Do these verses promise perpetuity to the Lord's church?

The existence of a chicken testifies that chickens have been on earth since Eden. Could the same principle apply to churches continuing since Christ, if they adhere to the core doctrines of the Bible? Why? Why not?

LANGUAGE MAKES THE WORLD GO AROUND

One of the most marvelous abilities of the human mind is that of communication, facilitated by language, whether written or spoken. It is nothing short of awesome!

Language comes from God, and though much evolution of it has occurred since its diversity at the Tower of Babel, it remains the single-most powerful tool of the species to advance, or to deteriorate, as the case may be.

Those wishing to make the most of their human potential should pay close attention to language. It is the lawyer's paradise; the conveyance of order; the mastery of disciplines when coupled with understanding, and the scribe's tool of recording fictional or non-fictional information.

It is fascinating that certain simple lines drawn in consistent patterns always denote certain sounds, known as phonemes. Moreover, when coupled with other specific, separate patterns, known as letters, ideas are communicated in ways commonly, recognized. But there is also language that transcends the common process. It is language expressed to the soul by the handiwork of God in nature. It is not alphabetical; it is not verbal; it is not written with pen and paper. It is the universal witness of God that Paul spoke of in Romans 10:17-18, *"So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. But I say, have they not heard? Yes verily, their sound went into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world."* "Sound" and "word" here are used symbolically to denote the communication of ideas. This is a reference to Psalm 19:1-3, *"The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard."* In short, one's reckoning with his Creator is facilitated in the species, and overwhelmingly, unmistakably, portrayed in nature itself, so that there is no excuse for failure to establish a relationship with Him.

Another case is that of one Helen Keller. Born blind and deaf, communication with her was impossible for many years. Once established, she was witnessed to about God. She said that she had known Him for a long time and trusted Him daily. Again, Paul reminded the Romans, and all of us, that the Spirit helps our infirmities when we do not know how best to pray because it makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Romans. 8:26.

But be it mundane or heavenly, there is no sweeter, important communication than the words "I love you!", which forever reverberates from the cross of Calvary where Jesus died that all of us might live.

FOR THOUGHT: In light of the above verses of scripture, do you think there will be any excuse for anyone at all for not yielding themselves to the Creator?

Have you ever felt a strong urge to cry out to God, but words failed you?

May one communicate with God without the utterance of words?

How important is daily communication with God?

LEARNING FROM UNRIGHTEOUSNESS

One might well consider the unjust, unrighteous, iniquitous folk to be a poor source from which to draw learning, but perhaps not! Think with me for a minute!

In Luke 16:1-12, the parable of the unjust steward is found. A brief review of this sometimes troubling, simple, all-too-commonplace parable will reveal much. The unjust steward took unfair advantage of his master's goods and wasted them. When it was discovered, he was given warning of his impending termination. Immediately, he acted to reduce the amount of goods in bad credit, helping his master's bottom line, but also using action to the advantage of his creditors to create a personal bond of indebtedness by which he might have a place to land when actually terminated. It was his master, whose goods he wasted, who commended the steward. He did not commend his unrighteous acts but recognized and commended his shrewdness.

It is here that Jesus makes application for His disciples then and now. It illustrated His point, an important point. Men of this world, in their dealings, are often more shrewd, and prudent than the disciples of God in their interchange with others. Much of the time disciples want to follow the flesh, and to play one-upmanship on their fellows instead of humbly loving and appreciating them for who, and what, they are in the great kingdom of heaven. Too often, reputed, spiritual men think others too ignorant or too stupid because they are not as materially blessed. It very well could be that those who are materially blessed are the ones spotlighted in the spiritual realm, to prove how they may, or may not, deal righteously with those things, to the benefit of others.

In any event, the application of Jesus to the Jewish people is clear: *"Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into the never-ending dwelling places."* How applicable this was soon to be for them. Moreover, it remains applicable to all of God's people today. Use the unrighteousness mammon (money) within your power to reach out to others in need. The time may well come when you will be that one, and others will remember your kindness and reach out to you. What a great way to steer life!

FOR THOUGHT: Does this incident and its application remind you of common sayings, such as what goes around comes around? What about the golden rule? Does it fit in here?

Do you believe tithing to your church is sufficient, and that the church should do the alms work with the money you give to it? May one fulfill alms work with things other than money? How? What are some acceptable ways people today could use mammon to make friends?

LEFT THY FIRST LOVE!

“Nevertheless, I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.”
Revelation 2:4.

The church of the Living God at Ephesus played a prominent part in the initial spread of Christianity as well as in the makeup of the New Testament. The book that bears its name features some of the best loved verses in the Bible.

The church was born in an idol-worshipping city, creating significant, violent protests, yet it was a tremendous work of the Apostle Paul, who went out of his way to pay it one last visit near the end of his free ministry. It was also home to the ministry of Aquila and Priscilla, and a preaching station of the Apostle Paul.

It was this writer's delight to visit the ruins of the ancient city which still bears ample evidence of its early prominence, including the remains of winding streets, shops, libraries, homes, and huge storage facilities for grain. There are remains of city laws engraved in stone in prominent places. Indeed, the ancient amphitheater that hosted a protest crowd of some 50,000 in the days of Paul is there together with remains of an ancient church house and deep-water baptistery. There are also the ruins of prominent brothels, speaking to the sensuality of the idol worship so prominent, water-cooled houses, epicurean regurgitation stations, and other indicators of material excesses of the day.

Again, the church is directly addressed in Revelation chapter two. The underscored criticism of it is that they had left their first love. Commentators, and other theologians, have conjectured just what that means, and often skewed it to their own thinking more than to contextual evidence.

It is abundantly clear that the church, and indeed the entire city, suffered from devastation of disease and earthquakes, yet the ruins of what once was, remains. Evidence abounds that what happened to the church at Ephesus is what continues to happen to churches throughout the age, they left their first love, and their candlestick was removed, even though they may have continued to operate religiously for a time. What is that first love? The same that we all have. It is love for the God of the Word, of whom we want to know more, from spiritual birth onward. Carnality often deals that a mortal blow. Do you love the Word more than this material world? How much time do you spend with it?

FOR THOUGHT: Where was Ephesus, and the other six churches mentioned in Revelation chapters two and three, located?

What do you think leaving their first love meant? Why?

Do you think that sin is being repeated in today's religious world?

What do you think would be a successful preventative of that?

LIBERTY VS. FREEDOM

“Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free . . .” Galatians 5:1.

Much is said these days about “liberty” and “freedom.” Often these terms are used interchangeably as synonyms. To be sure, there are areas in which distinguishing between the two might be difficult. However, each of these terms has its specific areas of meaning, as well as a wide berth of synonymous meanings.

Freedom is the larger term, which indicates lack of restraint in choices, actions, thoughts, etc. Liberty is more restrictive. It usually means freedom within a restricted area or zone. An illustration of this point may be its usage in military life. There are times when men in the military may have liberty. In these cases, the liberty may allow them to leave military bases to visit nearby towns or it may indicate base-wide liberty, but it does not include freedom to go home or to leave military service. The liberty is restricted in such cases by the one granting the liberty. Another illustration may be a courtesy granted. If your pastor were to visit another church, he might be granted the liberty to speak to the church. However, that liberty does not include the freedom to vote or perform other functions allocated to the pastor of that church. Hence, the liberty granted is freedom restricted to a specific function or purpose.

“Liberty” and “freedom” are Bible terms with which every Christian should be quite familiar. Perhaps the most famous passage is Leviticus 25:10 “...*proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof...*” James 1:25 calls the Bible the “*perfect law of liberty.*” That is, in a right relationship with God, man has all the liberty that can be accorded him within the restrictions of the love of God. “Freedom” or “free” is used much more frequently. Paul told the Romans, “*For when ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness.*” Rom. 6:20. He also said, “*Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness.*” Rom 6:18. Jesus said, “*Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.*” John 8:32. He also said, “*If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.*” John 8:36.

The greatest freedom with the greatest liberty in the governments of men are accorded the citizens of the United States of America. Thank God for this great country. However, the greatest freedom with the greatest liberty for all men everywhere is found in salvation in Christ Jesus, and in the teachings of the blessed Word. Paul said, “*Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free . . .*” Gal. 5:1.

FOR THOUGHT: Define in your own words the difference between freedom and liberty. How do the two ideas interact in Gal. 5:1?

Before salvation, one is said to be the servant of sin, but after salvation, he said to be free from sin, but becoming servants of righteousness. How do you explain this?

What does the admonition to “stand fast” mean to you?

LOAFING ONE'S WAY TO HEAVEN

"Therefore, we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life."
Romans 6:4.

God saves no one to loaf his way to heaven. He has a plan, a purpose for, and in, each of His dear children. Primary in that plan is obedience to Him! Biblical instructions are clear that the first step of obedience for a saved person is to follow Him in the watery grave of baptism; thus, to be raised to walk in newness of life. Rom. 6:4. Now some folks get all kinky on this subject. Some folks erroneously think baptism is essential to spirit salvation, and one is bound for hell without it! On the other end of that tangent, some think baptism is not important; that you can take it or leave it. Still others think that baptism is not a burial in water; that just a sprinkle in the face will do. Some apply it to infants who have no power of decision. The consistent New Testament pattern is that baptism is immersion in water of a professed believer by the authority of a New Testament church.

Jesus commanded His church to baptize the disciples it made. Matt. 28:18-20. This command is seen being faithfully carried out without deviation in the Holy Record. "Baptism" is a Greek word. It was not translated, purposefully by the KJV translators. Instead, it was transliterated (inserted bodily into the English language). It specifically means to "dip under or plunge." It is to symbolize a burial and resurrection, showing that the believer has died to sin, and is resurrected to walk in newness of life. Nothing but immersion could do that. It is the door to the fellowship of the Lord's church, and subsequent approved discipleship. Since no one has the authority to alter the Bible, the choice regarding baptism is do it man's way or God's way. I choose to believe the New Testament, and strictly follow God's way. Relinquishing the truth about this, or other Bible teachings, because the world wants it that way, is being spiritually lazy, and loafing the way to heaven. There will be a heavy price to pay for that.

FOR THOUGHT: Do you understand scriptural baptism to be ritually nice, or necessary to be obedient to the command of Christ Jesus?

If the subject or the method of baptism is changed from the Bible modal, what will happen to any scriptural church that does it?

Name at least four necessities for a scriptural baptism.

LOOKING UNTO JESUS

One of the great problems of life arises out of the allowances given to the eye. Jesus addressed this problem in His great sermon on the mount, Matthew 6:22-24, *"The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness! No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon."* Singleness of eye is the noblest goal. It is the fulfillment of the first and greatest commandment, *"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind."* Matt. 22:37.

Unfortunately, it is Satan's business to put seemingly endless options in everyone's pathway to claim the attention of the eye of desire. Being pulled by that desire allows darkness and indecisiveness to pervade the mind thus darkening the light of the body. What is one to do when life is not enjoyable, but hard, and filled with drudgery? It is so tempting to take the easy road, the more enjoyable way, for the flesh. How can we appreciate the sweet bye-and-bye when we are bogged down in the nasty now and now? There is only one appropriate and successful way to turn our eyes, and that is on Jesus. The writer of Hebrews 12:2 states, *"Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God."* Jesus walked through the nasty now and now in perfect faith. He emphatically despised, yes, despised, the shame of it all, but he did so for the joy that was set before Him, the joy of redeeming precious souls, making them fit subjects for heaven.

Perhaps the greatest admonition of the age is embodied here, "Looking unto Jesus...." In doing so, the eye is made single, and the whole body is filled with His glorious light. There is no attempt to deny a nasty now and now, but there is an emphatic promise that there is a sweet bye-and-bye for all who trust in Him, and follow His example of life. Is your eye single... or ... filled with the darkness of compounded objectives of no eternal profit? Lift up your eyes!

FOR THOUGHT: Children sing, "O, be careful little eyes what you see." Do you think all believers need to heed that simple warning?

Do you believe it to be important to turn away from inviting things if they are tempting to invade and reduce your personal relationship with God and His people? Why? Why not?

Why do you think so many believers succumb to temptations? Could it be that they are not looking unto Jesus for an example, or that they have not visualized the joy set before them?

LOVE, EVAPORATED OR ALIVE AND WELL?

“And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold.” Matt. 24:11-12.

The words of the above scripture were spoken by Jesus as He foretold conditions approaching the close of the present age. As He spoke this, the church was being cared for by His personal presence. It was totally Jewish, as it would be until sometime post-Pentecost. Notice the key words in the Greek New Testament writing, their import, meaning, and fulfillment in the present day.

“False Prophets” is “Pseudoprophetes” “false or lying prophets.”

“Deceive” is “Planao” “deceit, fraud, lead one cunningly away from truth.”

“Iniquity” is “Anomia” “not observant of rule or law; esp. that of God; anarchy.”

“Abound” is “Plethuno” “multiplied; multitudinous.”

“Love” is “Agape” “genuine love for God and His work.”

“Wax cold” is “Psucho” “to cool by blowing (process of evaporation.)”

For the first 1500 years of the Lord’s church, there was persecution from state religion. It never succeeded in eliminating it. So, the devil changed tactics beginning with the Protestant Reformation. Now, the church would be counterfeited again, and again, and again, practically without end. As those multi-viewed organizations permeated society, all claiming to be the Lord’s church, and engaging in evil and iniquitous practices, there would ultimately come discouragement and falling away by those who would rather listen to man than to search out answers from the Creator Himself.

Certainly, the conditions described by Jesus, and those evidenced by present day status appear to coincide. Who, then, will stand in this evil day, and in that near day of our King’s appearance, Whose question was, “When the son of man comes will He find faith on the earth?” Those who stand will be those who have sought the true answers, who are not content to hinge their eternal destiny with that of other religious sinners who may be as wrong as wrong can be. Certainly, the world is full of them, and they shall not stand when the Son of Man appears but will cry for the rocks and mountains to fall on them, to hide them from the face of Him Who comes.

To whom are you listening today? Is it Dr. Whizbang, or the Word of God? Has your love of God, and His Word waxed cold (evaporated)? It is time for each one to get into the Word. Let Dr. Whizbang answer to God for himself, which he most surely will, but he will not, cannot, answer for you! You, and you alone, will do that!

FOR THOUGHT: What do you think “wax cold” means, practically?

List at least three evidences of “waxing cold” that you see in your world.

Do you think entire churches are influenced by the actions of the world? Of other religions?

LOWING CATTLE AND BLEATING SHEEP

How blessed and marvelous is a dedicated church whose members are spiritually on fire for God! Their motive and purpose is to please God, and to influence others toward Him. They understand that Christ is the head of the church, the Savior of the body, and that His Word is sweet, and highly desired as the bread of life. In my mind, this was the status of the early churches of Paul's ministry. I think of Ephesus in particular having had the privilege of visiting that ancient city. Ephesus fell into decay and is no more. The zealous church that the apostle planted there is also gone, having suffered marginalization, persecution, and pressures from a godless, but religious society.

It is interesting to note that only a few decades after its birth, the church received a stern warning from Jesus in the words, "I have somewhat against thee..." Though commended for some spiritual assets, the charge must have been stinging to their hearts. They had busied themselves with religious activity instead of the necessary, personal one-on-one relationship with Christ Jesus; hence, they were told ". . . thou hast left thy first love." Rev. 2:4. Simply put, they were engaged in religion, but their motives were misdirected.

Could they turn a deaf ear to the Lord? Could they continue as a church that way? The answer is "yes," but they would not be a church belonging to the Lord Jesus. They must remember from where they had fallen, repent, or else they would lose their candlestick (be severed from Christ as His body).

This problem did not end with the Ephesians. It goes on in wholesale manner today. All of God's people need to re-think Samuel's confrontation with Saul when the king declared he had done the will of God. Samuel asked, "*What meaneth then this bleating of the sheep in mine ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear?*" I Sam. 15:14. The prophet then replied: ". . . *Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.*" I Sam. 15:22.

Church activities may involve a lot of misdirected motives! But God is pleased when His people return to their first love, a personal relationship with God and His Holy Word. Forget the fat cattle and sheep, and the "sacrifices" to the Lord that cost you nothing!

FOR THOUGHT: How do sheep and cattle belie the spiritual heart of King Saul?

Since his motive was to offer them to the Lord, do you think Samuel was right to confront him about this?

Do otherwise well-meaning folks still substitute their thinking for the Word of God, especially when it does not suit them?

MATCHING HEAVEN'S RECORD

A most interesting statement is made in Matthew 16:19, *“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.”* Some erroneously think Jesus was giving those keys to Peter, but not so! Those keys were given to His church which the apostles then constituted.

A close look at the grammar of the statement causes one to understand the gravity of the church always doing the right thing. Grammatically speaking, in the original language, it literally says, “And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.” In other words, heaven gets it right every time, and is never wrong! The challenge is to the church to match heaven's record all the time in all that is incumbent upon it to do, so it will be a match to heaven's record in the day of the Judgment Seat of Christ.

Jesus taught His church what to believe, how to behave, and what to do, as well as what to reject. It is an awesome responsibility to teach the Word, and to teach it correctly. It is an awesome responsibility to live in transformation to the teaching of the Holy Word, morally, spiritually, doctrinally. As each church member excels in these challenges, the church of which he is a member excels as well. However, in so many cases, folks think, and act, as though the church belongs to them, and they can vote to do whatever they wish. Wrong! But, in that thinking, doctrines have been cast aside, discipline ignored or outright rejected, and appeals made to the world in the guise of making the church relevant to it. So, what have we done with the keys? Are they mainly cast aside for what we THINK will please God?

At the Bema Seat of Christ (judgment of His people for the sake of reward) some will be saved yet so as by fire, seeing all their life works burned as wood, hay, and stubble. I Cor. 3:9-15. Some churches will be surprised to learn that they are not a part of the Bride of Christ, having long since suffered their candlestick's removal. I believe in going by the Book to match heaven's record!

FOR THOUGHT: How does the grammar of the original language alter your thinking about what this verse is saying to us?

Do you think it will matter when the age is over, just how a church record matches that of heaven?

What do you perceive the meaning of the keys of the kingdom to be? Why?

MEALTIME PRIORITY

“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.” Acts:20:28

At times, the responsibility of a breadwinner is summed up as “He/she has mouths to feed.” That quotation, as well as the noun “breadwinner,” denotes why responsibility demands to be fulfilled. We labor at various vocations to put bread on the table; to bring home the bacon; to feed the hungry mouths. Whatever else responsible adults may provide for their dependents, and there are many things, it is basically reduced to that thought.

The shepherd is to feed the sheep. Truly, the shepherd provides protection from danger, shelter from the storms, etc. But the general well-being of the sheep is in their being well fed.

Is it any wonder then that this was the thrice emphasized duty that Jesus conveyed to Peter in John 21:15-17? Jesus’ reply to Peter’s answer to His questions, “Do you love me more than these?” and “Are you my friend?” was, “Feed my sheep!”

Moreover, the charge given to ministers in the meeting of the Apostle Paul with elders from Ephesus was, *“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.” Acts 20:28.*

So, even in the spiritual realm, ministerial responsibility is reduced to, “there are mouths to feed.” Pastors do well to take that responsibility seriously. Beating on an empty bucket may work on rare occasions, but when done repeatedly, the sheep fail to respond. What this means practically is that a pastor must give a large amount of his time in prayer, and in bible study to adequately preach the Word. Being saved sinners, pastors, as others, are prone to be tangential. Some love evangelism, others love doctrine, some love to socialize, still others love to spend time with family, friends, hobbies, etc. There is a time and a place for all honorable things, but one must prioritize and balance them. It is not easy, and the minister deserves, and desires, the prayers of God’s people that he may fulfill his role well. In light of specific statements in the above verses, ministers do well to prioritize properly by spending much time in the Word and prayer preparing to “feed the precious flock of God.”

FOR THOUGHT: How many hours do you think ministers devote to preparation of each sermon? Would it surprise you that the caring shepherd spends 6, 8, or 10? How many sermons does your pastor deliver each week?

How does sermon preparation and delivery manifest one’s love for Jesus?

MISSIONARY OR MERCENARY?

“And said unto them, It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves.” Matthew 21:13.

Repulsive is the thought that any member of the body of the Lord Jesus Christ may be less than he should be when measured against Bible teachings. But time and experience underscore the reality that many members fail, some miserably. Think about it!

Both Old and New Testaments are chocked full of failures in matters of faith. This is precisely why God had to become a man and do in the flesh what men could never do; hence, the jubilant meaning of grace! One scenario in particular seems to shout over the vicissitudes of time as a condemnatory warning to modern church saints. It is the wrath of Jesus toward the polluting merchandisers in the temple of God. Instead of it being a house of prayer, men had made it a house of merchandise. (Money, money makes the world go around, and the love of it is the root of all evil!)

One wonders just how deeply those fleshly aspirations with mammon are embedded into modern church life. Every member of the Lord's church is to be a missionary of the gospel, and a disseminator of its glorious hope, but it appears in many cases the prime directive has fallen prey to fleshly, religious big-I-tis (not a word), and more expensive buildings with their necessary social programs. Larger congregations tend to increase pressure to not offend with any hard truth, while moderating the pulpit by more remuneration for the moderate pastor, whose desire is for that to ever increase. Soon, the concrete of material mush hardens into an intractable, corporation of human goodness, which is unidentifiable as the body of Christ, except as men want it to be, by their own evaluation. The end product is easily seen as more mercenary than missionary.

The late Dr. Fred G. Stevenson, professor of Hebrew at Missionary Baptist Seminary, my alma mater, was heard to say more than once, “Boys, the worst thing that ever happened to the Baptist ministry is a regular, fat, paycheck for the pastor.” His statement must not be understood as the laborer being unworthy of his hire, but in the context of history, and in the ramifications of money fused into the ministry.

Each little step that separates and insulates ministry from those who sustain the minister is a step too far, and a propellant down the mercenary road. Ministers, churches, and parishioners would all do well to judge their status. Are you more missionary or mercenary?

FOR THOUGHT: What kind of balance should the ideas of “missionary” and “mercenary” exist in true New Testament churches?

What do you think is truer to the Bible model: a smaller church adequately supporting a pastor commensurate with the community, or a megachurch pouring millions of dollars into ministers for palaces and airplanes? Why?

MONEY, MONEY, MONEY!

“But what think ye? A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, ‘Son, go work today in my vineyard.’ He answered and said, ‘I will not.’; but afterward he repented and went. And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, ‘I go, sir.’, and went not. Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, ‘The first.’ Jesus saith unto them, ‘Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you.’” Matthew 21:28-31.

Describing his ex-wife, a hoarder of material things once said, “Money, money, money! All she ever did was ask for money!” “Well, how much did you give her?” asked a listener. “I didn’t give her any!” was the reply. Well, little wonder what happened next.

Some “Christians” are a lot like the coarse fellow. “Church, church, church! All I hear is how I ought to go to church!” “Well, how often do you go?”, asked a listener. “Well, I go all the important times,” was the reply, “like on Mother’s Day and Easter! Ain’t that enough?” So, what happens next?

Maybe the fellow dies. Maybe the church dies. Maybe the Lord comes back. There is no good future for the backslider who prefers this lousy, material world to the purposes of God in his life. Time and life given to God are extremely important! The gift of them is not obligatory to the knowledgeable, happy Christian. He realizes how blessed he is to have the opportunity to take part in holy, eternal things. He also knows life on earth is brief, but eternity never ends. In wisdom, he lays up treasure for his never-ending day.

FOR THOUGHT: When a dollar is given to God’s work, is it just a dollar, or has the giver given both a dollar and the earning power of that dollar for the rest of his life?
Is sharing time and money with God’s work a burden or a blessing? Why?

\NEEDED: B'NAI HASSEPHER

"Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." 2 Timothy 2:15.

B'NAI HASSEPHER: these are Hebrew words that translate "Sons of the Book." The need of such is underscored as the world races pell-mell to a grand finale, and as the pressure increases in churches, and among pastors, to be politically correct, non-offensive, and heavily involved in religious, social activities. Could it be described as a dumbing down of the churches in general? Little attention beyond a spiritual salvation emphasis is commonly given to the Bible. Think about it!

It is lamentable that such an obvious gap exists between modern ministers and those of a generation or two gone by. The former ones were B'NAI HASSEPHER, "Sons of the Book," much more concerned with the unity, harmony, and symmetry of the Holy Book being set forth than a psychology lesson on how to win friends and influence people for the enhancement of a religious, social group. While it is laudable that the basic tenets of the gospel are still often presented in most of our churches, the same may also be heard in any number of other churches, that would be regarded as heretical. One may attend any number of churches nowadays, and leave wondering what he may have heard that he would not have heard in several denominational churches. It is comparable to one excitedly hogging all the milk possible, but never having access to meat.

In a large number of preachers (about 500) a young college graduate extolled in psychological terms how pastors perform to benefit from increased membership in their churches. After so long a time, an older minister arose and loudly asked, "Is the Bible still our rule of faith and practice?" Upon hearing that affirmed, he went on to reply, "Well, then, isn't all of this just a bunch of foolishness?" It was! But there are too few who understand that today, and fewer who dare to stand up strongly to it.

A number of years ago, a fellow pastor of a large church confided in me that he was going to leave the ministry. Somewhat shocked, I asked why. He replied that he had preached all the sermons he could find in the book, and he was tired of repeating himself. Incredible! His inability, or unwillingness, to study THE BOOK, and believe what he found, then prepare it for a scrumptious meal for his congregation led him to the inevitable sickness produced by formal rituals and stale tables.

In times such as these, there is a crying need for true spiritual refreshment and nourishment that can come only from hearts submitted to God and minds studied up on His Word! Let social religion be for modernists. I appeal to all who take the name of our Lord unto themselves to labor to actually become B'NAI HASSEPHER, SONS OF THE BOOK! Let it be underscored that when it is time to cross the bar from which no traveler returns, the only thing one can take with him is what he believes. One cannot believe what he does not know. Thus, the pursuit and sharing of spiritual knowledge should be the prime directive of us all.

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think something is wrong when ministers get sermons from subscribed books or media evangelists rather than from God's Word?
What do you think to be an appropriate substitute for Bible study?

Do you agree that something is amiss in a Christian who has not learned anything new from the Bible in 20-40 years?

OFTEN, LITTLE IS MUCH

The sacrifice of two mites, the widow's offering at the Temple, is often brushed aside as not so meaningful to a people who are relatively wealthy, and who have access to resources should they fall on hard times. Luke 21:1-4. Rethink this, please!

A minister friend who decided to leave the ministry once told me that even though his paycheck from his church was not much, it became significantly larger when there was none at all coming in. Humm! Perspective! On another occasion I heard a fellow express appreciation to his friend, saying, "If I had a million dollars, I would give you half of it." "O.K.," said the friend. "Don't feel bad, just give me half of that hundred-dollar bill you have in your pocket." For some reason, the generosity of the fellow dissipated, and he refused. It is so easy to be generous with what you do not have, but much more difficult with that which you do have. This brings us back to thoughts on the widow's mites.

Truly the mites were extremely small, and of little value in what they would purchase. They would not buy groceries for the week or for a day, or even for a meal. But they did have value. Jesus Himself observed the offering that day. The bags of silver and gold that the well-to-do offered had great monetary value and would go far in the upkeep of the Temple. Nevertheless, Jesus' value system was foreign to them. He declared that the poor widow had given more than they all, not just more than one bag of gold, but ALL. To give willingly the last of one's resources, without any system in place to replenish them, constituted a great gift. Moreover, the purpose to which the gift was given underscored a heart of deep reverence and love for the things of God. It is not clear whether the poor woman ever knew that Jesus was watching and commended her, but she has been rejoicing in that reality for nearly two thousand years of her residence in glory now, and it will never stop.

The lesson is clear. God is pleased with the gift of a person's heart, and where the heart is, there will be the treasure also. Perhaps one's life, talents, treasures seem small in comparison to others who appear to have these things in abundance, but it is certain that in every detail of life, Jesus is observing, and He knows that little or much in man's estimation is relevant to one's total possessions. What so many do have in their power to give may seem small, but little is much when God is in it.

FOR THOUGHT: Is it possible that a large gift given by one who remotely follows the Lord may be considered small by Him, while a small gift given by one dedicated to following Him may be considered large?

Do you think the designation of "large" or "small" is relative to what remains in one's possession after making the gift?

Do you believe gifts to the service of God constitute laying up treasure in heaven? Why?

PERFECTION: A MIND GAME, OR POSSIBILITY?

An oft passed over, but most interesting statement of Jesus is the capstone admonition of Matthew Chapter Five found in verse 48, *“Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.”* Well, sober-minded folks are acutely aware of their shortcomings if not straight-out failures. So, the question must then be asked, is perfection an actual possibility for earthly disciples or is this a mind game statement urging them ever forward toward a noble, but unreachable goal? If it is a possibility, what does it mean, and how may one know if he has achieved such status? We have to think about this!

The context of the Sermon on the Mount (these scriptures) presents how one is to live before God under the covenant of grace in contrast to the covenant of law. The term, “perfect” does not mean to be without sin, but to be complete in understanding, and in practice of life of those tenets of the faith once delivered to the saints. In other words, to receive the Bible as ultimate truth, and especially its basic, doctrinal information about the sinfulness of all men; salvation by grace through faith, plus nothing; eternal security of the believer; deep water baptism of a professed believer at the hands of a New Testament Church, etc. These are foundational, but the Sermon on the Mount also calls upon us to live above the Mosaic Law in religious, moral, political, and financial observance as well.

These things are the mind of God revealed to penitent believers in New Covenant relationship with Him. Our Father in heaven is totally complete in all these things, and by His grace and submission to His Word, under the tutorship of the Holy Spirit, modern New Covenant disciples may be complete in knowledge, and in practice. Doing so is distinct emulation of the Creator. Moreover, those things are as right and approved of God in His people as they are in Him.

Thus of the many references of “perfect” and “perfection” in the New Testament, all meaning “completion,” perhaps the best summarization of the idea is found in Hebrews 6:1-3, *“Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto **perfection**; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this will we do, if God permit.”*

FOR THOUGHT: Do you use the word “perfect” to mean sinless or without flaw, or to mean the state of being complete? How does the New Testament use it?

God calls upon His people to be perfect. What does He mean by this? How may one achieve perfection? Is it instant or is it a process?

PLEASE DON'T PROSTITUTE THE CHURCH

"And here men that die receive tithes; but there he receiveth them, of whom it is witnessed that he liveth." Hebrews 7:8.

Doubtless, I will not endear myself to some readers with this article, but the church should not be prostituted. Let me explain.

A person is prostituted by selling his/her body for money, rather than working in legitimate enterprises to obtain it honorably. In other words, there is a right way and there are wrong ways to obtain both the necessities and the honorable desires of life. Extrapolate this into the world of churches.

God did not leave his church destitute of a plan of finance. There are necessities, program expenses such as mission work and some creature comforts to be provided in the normal operation of a church. Special projects, which, if a church determines to engage in them must be properly supported. So, if God has a financial plan for His churches, what is that plan? Simply put, tithes and offerings from the members of the congregation.

Often, one sees groups, young and old, hawking some service or product in the name of their church to accomplish some task. Truly, the task may be good, but to be reduced to "begging" the world to accept a product or service for money in the name of the church is tantamount to prostituting the church before the world instead of practicing the plan God gave it. Why do that?

Should a church sanction what it cannot or is unwilling to finance? If so, would it not be better for a group to agree to individually, or collectively, perform a service or sell a product as a simple business enterprise, leaving the church name out of it, then voluntarily give whatever is earned to the church for the project under consideration? This way the Lord would be pleased at selfless gifts and His church would not be esteemed a nuisance in that endeavor by a world that really does not care to be solicited. "But folks would not pay unless the name of the church is connected with it," some say. Exactly the point. The world is being solicited to support a church project when the members should be making that happen. Where is the honor for God in that type of action? It is simply ignoring His Word to substitute man's way. There is a biblical name for that sort of thing. It is called "Iniquity."

Narrow-minded? Maybe! But I do not apologize for having a high and holy regard for the wonderful church of the Lord Jesus Christ. God's people should do things God's way. And, please do not prostitute the church!"

FOR THOUGHT: Do you believe the Bible presents a God-honoring plan of church finance? Do you see a difference in people engaging in honest business transactions, then giving the proceeds to the church, rather than using the church's name to solicit funds, which people might not otherwise provide?

While some may not see soliciting the world as all that negative, is it better to follow Bible instructions rather than what seems O.K. to people? If not, where may the line be drawn?

POWER IN THE GRIT AND THE GRIND!

An accused and doubtless guilty woman was brought to Jesus, testing His judgment to give consent to the law that she should be stoned to death. Following pointed words that convicted everyone present of guilt, Jesus wrote in the sand. Did you ever wonder what He wrote? We cannot know for certain because it is not revealed, but whatever it was, those who read the words exited the scene one by one. Think with me about what that may have been in keeping with His Holy Word.

The woman was caught IN THE VERY ACT of adultery. She thus accrued the penalty of death under the Law of Moses. But Jesus saw through the stark hypocrisy of these miserable characters. We do not know for certain, but perhaps He wrote, "Where is the man with whom she was caught?" John 8:6-8. These hypocrites were altogether willing for the woman to be stoned to death, but especially willing to protect their guilty comrade. Oh, how their hearts needed to be torn with old-fashioned, genuine repentance!

Our Lord once said, ". . . *What is this then that is written, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner? Whosoever shall fall upon that stone shall be broken; but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder.*" Luke 20:17-18.

So, there it is! Power in the grit of sand that Jesus used to form words that the accusers could not negate or circumvent and power in the Stone that grinds. The word of God is powerful. It is powerful from the pulpit. It is powerful from the written page. It is also powerful if drawn in the shifting grit of sandy, Judean soil.

Additionally, the power of the Word that leads men to repentance still breaks guilty hearts, stubborn wills, and remolds them to serve the Righteous Creator of heaven and earth. When they hear the Word and fall upon that Stone which is Christ the Lord, it happens. Conversely, those who fail to be so broken by His life-giving Word will find that Righteous Stone falling upon them in judgment, a fall of grinding proportions that will leave them as powder. Personally, I have opted for the power of the grit, rather than that of the grind. I join my Lord in pleading for all men to make the same decision in genuine repentance.

FOR THOUGHT: As Creator, and ultimate Judge of the universe, do you believe that the final destiny of every person will be by the power of God in life or in condemnation?

Do you think the mindset of people who brought the guilty woman to Jesus still exists in some folks who call themselves "Christian?"

Power in the Grit alludes to words written in the sand. Do you believe words still have power to change human hearts and minds? Name one instance of it happening.

PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY REVISITED

"Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth." I Tim. 2:4.

Practical Christianity, just what is it? Is it abundant, material things by which large buildings and programs may be built and offered within a community, or is it something else? Think with me about the words of the title.

A good dictionary will reveal that "practical" means "of, or concerned with, the actual doing or use of something rather than with theory and ideas." This seems to be a well put definition. However, when one seeks a definition of "Christianity," information flows all over the place, and most of it is far from practical. Consider that "Christianity" is a noun denoting that system of solid, biblical beliefs espoused by those who profess to be "Christian." These two terms derive their origin and retain their character as being Greek. When translated, the term "Christ" is the same as the Hebrew term "Messiah" both of which denote "an anointed one." This was the requisite of Old Testament priests and kings, which foreshadowed the New Testament Son of God, Jesus.

But Christ is not a part of the name of Jesus. He is Jesus, the Christ, or the anointed one. This anointing of Jesus was accomplished at His baptism, and the substance of the anointing was the Holy Spirit of God. Moreover, it was His good pleasure to confer that same anointing on His body, the blood-bought church, at Pentecost. Therefore, in context, a Christian is one who, by virtue of spiritual redemption, and submission to the leadership of the Holy Spirit is a part of that anointed, blood-bought body. This is to be inferred as one, who in keeping with those prerequisites, lives day to day life within the concepts of those premises. This certainly is far afield from the common usage of the term, but it is the truth of the term, and it has never been authoritatively used to convey the hodge-podge, often contradictory, tenets of fleshly religionists.

So, we consider "practical Christianity...." While theories may sometimes be entertained as catapults of thought, they are recognized as just that. Practical Christianity means of, or concerned with, the actual doing or use of biblical teachings. When that is applied to those who are called "Christian", it means those things of Holy Writ which add to a greater understanding, and its subsequent joy that the Creator has chosen to reveal to us of life here and now. Respect for His Word pleases Him, as does the joyful anticipation of hope He reveals to us of our immediate future. We revisit those things often, as should be done!

FOR THOUGHT: How would you define the difference between nominal Christianity and Practical Christianity?

Do you believe initial faith in Christ Jesus alone will mold one into a Christian if the rest of the Bible is ignored or worse, changed to fit a sinful lifestyle?

Should the believer be content with initial faith in Christ Jesus, or seek to follow Him according to His Word?

PRESENCE OF MIND

“Presence of mind.” I don’t hear it much anymore, but in years gone by the expression was used by many of the older generation. Describing appropriate actions of another, perhaps in times of crisis, great or small, it would be said that he or she “had the presence of mind” to act decisively and quickly. How good it is to have the “presence of mind!”

The halls of history are strewn with stories of those who did not have the presence of mind to avert, or to deal with disaster. Where were the minds of those in Troy who admitted the Trojan Horse into their city? Where were the minds of Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar that they were caught in utter dismay and calamity. Where were the minds of the defenders of this country on December 7, 1941? This could go on and on.

While books of instances of such absence of mind fill libraries, there is one small library of 66 books illuminating the path to the spiritual presence of mind, and its reward for eternity.

A spiritually present mind is a Christ-like mind. Phil. 4:8, *“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus...”*

A spiritually present mind is a renewed mind. Rom. 12:3, *“... be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind. . .”*

A spiritually present mind is a mind coinciding with others in the body of Christ. 1 Cor. 1:10, *“... but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.”* “Be of the same mind one toward another. . .” Rom. 12:16.

A spiritually present mind is a mind proactive in the service of God. 2 Cor. 8:19, *“... this grace, which is administered by us to the glory of the same Lord, and the declaration of your ready mind.”*

A spiritually present mind is a mind whose affections are set on holy things. Col. 3:1,2, *“If ye be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above. . . set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.”*

A spiritually present mind is a mind that is protected in sobriety. 1 Peter 1:13, *“Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober. . .”*

The devil is a counterfeiter, an illusion maker whose power lies in deceit. He walks about as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour by that deception. The weapon he cannot withstand is the truth! Truth, wielded by the presence of a spiritual mind, wins the victory over the devil every time. May we be quick to seek the grace of God in knowledge and employ what we learn of Him in every situation with the presence of mind!

FOR THOUGHT: Pick out the words or phrases above that describe a spiritual presence of mind.

How did earlier generations generally use the phrase “presence of mind?”

Do you think some Christians are so occupied with worldly things that they do not have a spiritual “presence of mind?”

How do you perceive the spiritual “presence of mind” in others?

PRESUMING ON GOD

"Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me." Psalm 51:10.

Man's propensity to presume on the Creator God of heaven and earth appears to know no end, at least not in this age. Spurred on by religious charlatans who prey on the ignorance of folks, the name it and claim it crowd forges onward, full steam ahead. Let's think about that for a minute.

God has shown His mighty power in times past to accomplish purposes within His holy will for a people, place, or thing. Here are a few of those displays of His mighty power aside from creation itself. He brought the mighty Egyptian nation to its knees, and its military to its destruction in ways so far removed from human thinking that it stands out in the minds of modern Christians as an all time, great, miraculous action. Shall we mention Joshua and the conquest of Jericho? What about Daniel in the lion's den, or the three Hebrew children in the fiery furnace, or Elijah on Mt. Carmel, or Peter being released from prison, or Paul in shipwreck? On and on it goes for the Lord has wrought mighty works to show Himself, both to His people, and to the heathen.

So now, the world's religious folks, in name only, presume that if God is the same yesterday, today, and forever as the scriptures declare, then all they have to do is call upon Him to do mighty things, and if He likes you, He will, but if he doesn't, He won't. So, they pick out an isolated incident like that of Jabez, and without the slightest idea of what that is all about, they beseech the Lord for personal riches or popularity which they can parlay into wealth and are perplexed that He does not answer them as they wish.

If God has done this before, and if He is the same, and if He really is no respecter of persons, why, oh why, does He not do it again for us, they ask. It may just be that they are asking God to become a respecter of persons and do for them what He is not doing for others. Then, there is the fact that they are asking amiss to consume it upon personal lusts, as James points out in his epistle.

This sort of thing bleeds over into the life of nominal Christians as well. Those who do not live a true Christian life will become ill or have some tragedy occur. Then they want the church to pray for them. For what? That they might have healing? For what? So that they might continue to pile up judgment against themselves by living a life of sin and iniquity rather than serving the Lord who bought them with His precious blood?

Enough presuming on God already! It is fruitless except in an evil way. Let those who would ask of God first surrender to Him and pray for grace that they might serve Him according to His will in the short time of this pilgrimage. It is the only fitting thing to do for one Who has saved us unto himself.

FOR THOUGHT: Should prayers be offered for any purpose, any time, or should one be careful to come before the Lord with penitent attitude and clean heart?

What did the psalmist mean when he said, *"If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me?"* Psalm 66:18.

Do you think people really do presume on God when they only acknowledge Him in times of trouble?

PRIESTS, PRIEST, AND A TORN VEIL

In the organization of religious practice in the Old Testament there existed a movable tabernacle, and later, a temple built on the same order. The two-room structure hosted an initial room known as the Holy Place. There was also a second room heavily veiled from the first. It was known as the Holy of Holies or The Most Holy Place. It was in this second room that the Ark of the Covenant was located. It was here that the high priest offered the blood of sacrificial animals for the sins of the people on Yom Kippur (day of atonement). It was here that a manifestation of Almighty God appeared from time to time. Busy priests ministered about the sacrifices of the people outside these structures and were admitted into the first room for specific purposes that had to do with the table of showbread, the altar of incense, and the candlestick. However, no one entered the Holy of Holies except the High Priest, and that after specific preparation, and for definite purpose at the appointed time.

Now these things are written for our admonition upon whom the ends of the world are come, I Cor. 10:11. The tabernacle and the temple are no more, but they and their service are types and symbols of present realities that must not be overlooked or forgotten. The Old Testament priests are a type of New Testament priests, which are bona fide, active church members, I Peter 2:5,9. The high priest of Israel is a type of our high priest, *"Who entered into the Holy of Holies in heaven with His own blood as a once-for-all offering for the sins of all who trust in Him, whereby He is able to save them the uttermost who come unto God by Him!"* Hebrews 7:25. *"But, as a high priest after the order of Melchisedek, rather than that of Aaron, He continues the service of high priest endlessly in that He is at the right hand of God, making intercession for us,"* Romans 8:25, Heb. 7:25. *"Moreover, we have not a high priest which cannot be touched with our infirmities, but was tempted on all points as we are, yet without sin."* Hebrews 4:15.

Upon the resurrection of our high priest from the tomb, the veil of the temple that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place was torn into two pieces, Matt. 27:51. The veil is no longer there to restrict New Testament priests from coming boldly before the throne of Grace with petitions for self and for others, and to find help in time of need. What a "hallelujah-type" privilege! The profound wonder of the age is that it is so little used. May God help us all to not be lazy, uncompassionate priests, but priests that are busier than the Old Testament priests ever were, serving, praying, teaching, ever learning, worshipping in spirit and in truth.

FOR THOUGHT : What is significant about the high priesthood of Jesus being after the order of Melchisedek, rather than the Levitical priesthood of Aaron?

Do you identify as a New Testament priest, the embodiment that Old Testament priests foreshadowed?

Do you believe the Bible teaches the New Testament priesthood is in local church context? Why or why not?

PRUNING AND GRAFTING: A REASON TO TAKE HEED

The eleventh chapter of Romans is a most interesting revelation of the Master Gardner's pruning and grafting. The information promotes great joy while being forward in stern warning. It speaks not so much of spiritual salvation as it does covenant relationship with God which is predicated upon spiritual salvation and obedience to Him.

The purpose of a special people of covenant relationship with God was begun in Abraham and concludes with the New Testament Church. Under the tutorial ministry of the Holy Spirit and the completed Word, the church brings saved men to their highest level of spiritual maturity, which qualifies them to rule and reign with Christ Jesus in the next age, the millennial reign of the Savior.

Ancient Israel was the object of that covenant relationship. First in promise to, and through Abraham, then in tutorial law from Moses to Christ Jesus. They were the branches of the holy root whose purpose was to bring forth fruit according to the nature of the root. Their abject failure to do so led to the nation being cut off from covenant relationship, even as branches severed from the tree. But did that mean God's covenant with them was a failure? No, it did not. There was a remnant of Jewish believers who came into New Testament relationship to Jesus. The first church was one hundred percent Jewish. But the nation was cut off because of unbelief. They failed to recognize their Messiah when He came to them, offering to them the kingdom of heaven. Moreover, they crucified Him as an imposter. Thus, were they severed from the holy olive tree.

The apostle underscores that their being cut off opened the door of that special relationship to the nations. Saved people all over the world have the grand privilege of coming into covenant relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ by baptism and fellowship in a local, visible, New Testament Church. Such people of the nations are said to be wild branches that are grafted into the holy olive tree, to bring forth fruit of the nature of the root. How long will the natural branches remain severed? Until the time of the nations be fulfilled. Then they will be grafted back into the holy olive tree. Until then they will remain in unbelief, and in spiritual blindness. The concern of the present population of the Lord's churches should be one of attention to avoid lethargy, spiritual sleep, and arrogance of their standing with Christ Jesus. Churches have been pruned from the Tree also and will continue to be as they become of like mind as ancient Israel. *"For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee."* Romans 11:21.

FOR THOUGHT: Does the pruning and grafting taught in Romans Eleven mean people are becoming lost again while some are being saved?

What is the difference between being spiritually saved and being in covenant relationship with God?

Do you think disobedient believers will enjoy the same blessings forever that obedient believers enjoy? If yes, then what is the purpose of the Bible?

What do you think Romans Eleven is teaching?

PUT IT IN THE BANK!

The message of Jesus is clear. Put what He has given you to good use for His glory, and for your own future reward. He tells the story of a lord placing one, five, and ten talents into the hands of his servants with instructions to use until he returned. Upon his return and reckoning with those servants, the ten-talent servant had gained other ten; the five-talent servant had gained other five. But the one-talent servant buried it and presented it intact to his lord. In anger, the lord commanded the talent be taken from him and given to the one who had gained ten. He chided the slothful servant, *"Wherefore then gavest not thou my money into the bank, that at my coming I might have required mine own with usury?"* Matt. 25:27.

In our time, some folks who clawed their way through the Great Depression of the 1930s never trusted banks again with their material wealth. Some found other productive ways to use it, while still others were content to bury it. A certain couple formed the habit of storing silver coins in jars, then burying the jars in several places on their property. In time, they fell victim to dementia, and forgot all about their buried wealth. Following their demise, their property was sold for business purposes. Land leveling machines unearthed these jars as the property was prepared for construction. They should have put their money into the bank where it could have drawn interest, and been used to bless their life, and perhaps the lives of others, too. Their determination to keep their wealth secluded and secretive is a sad, but oft repeated story.

In biblical terms extrapolated to modern times, talents are abilities, opportunities, deeds. God has given to each certain talents. But, some folks appear determined to keep their talents a secret even to the point of making it hard for one to find evidence that they are, in fact, a Christian. Others seem so ready to use what they have for God's glory, even if it hosts obvious imperfections. Amen, to their kind! They are laying up treasure in heaven, and that is the best, most secure bank of the universe. Talents so used will draw the commendation of the Master and produce rich reward at the end of the way.

"Use it or lose it," applies to a lot of things in life. So, don't lose it, but use it!

FOR THOUGHT: What do you consider your talents to be with which you might honor the Lord?

Identify at least three of them.

In what ways could their multiplication be noted?

What are human qualities that the Bible values to be of great price?

Do you envision actually giving account to Jesus for what you have done with what you have?

RATTLING THE POTS AND PANS

In the many travels of Jesus, Luke 10:38-42 records an incident wherein a certain village Jesus was received into the house of a woman named Martha who had a sister named Mary. What happened there tells a lasting story of different mindsets, when focused on mundane, material things in contrast to spiritual things.

Martha busied herself with things she determined necessary to be a good hostess to a much-honored guest. Meal preparation was much more difficult in those days, and to set a pleasing table required not only planning, but much work. She threw herself into it.

On the other hand, her sister Mary seemed unconcerned about what kind of table was set or what would be the nourishment of the day. She simply wanted to sit at Jesus' feet and listen to Him talk. There were so many questions; so much to learn.

Finally, Martha could take it no longer. She said to Jesus, *"Lord dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? Bid her therefore that she help me."* The reply of Jesus is so clear and forceful, as in tenderness He answered, *"Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her."*

By our actions, we plainly display what is truly important to us. Many things are important enough to be done, but they do not have to meet a time schedule or be accomplished in a particular way, especially if they conflict with spiritual opportunities to learn and to worship.

The world passes away, and all that pertains to it. But the Word of God abides forever. It is by it, and it alone, that proper preparation is made for life both here and hereafter. *"Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her."* Let it be priority one to sublimate the earthly things that clamor for our attention to that good part which Mary chose.

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think it degrading that churches become known more about potluck dinners than spiritual meat?

Food for the body is needful, but how much does the value of spiritual food exceed it?

Did crowds follow Jesus after He fed five thousand with loaves and fishes from a little boy's lunch? Why did they cease following Him?

RECONCILIATION AND NONSENSE

The subject of reconciliation is heard across much of the religious world today. But it appears to be as much secular as religious, and in some cases outright nonsense. Think with me a minute.

Just what does the word mean in the context of current usage? Largely, it is calling upon churches to apologize to the black community for the sins of fathers many generations ago when slavery was common. The outcome hoped for is peace and acceptance with others who harbor ill feelings over the actions of that era.

The truth is that those who harbor such feelings are wrong to do so. They were never wronged, and the present generation never did them wrong that they should apologize. Moreover, history reveals that many black people owned slaves as well. Additionally, the Bible never condemns slavery as a way of life; rather it presents it as the ideal of relationship of man with God. The term “doulos” meaning bondsman, is an oft repeated New Testament term of obedient man’s relationship with God. Furthermore, one may repent of his own sins, but he cannot repent of the sins of another. The same is true of apologies. So, the whole thing is a farce!

The New Testament presentation of reconciliation is that of man being reconciled to God, which is possible only through repentance and faith in the merits of Christ Jesus, and the truth of His Word. If one is to enjoy the blessings of God by growing in knowledge and grace, he must be submissive, that is, reconciled, to the leadership of the Holy Spirit in connective terms of the Holy Word. Reconciliation measures one against the pattern set down in Holy Writ, and only that which matches is acceptable.

Reconciliation is not some high and lofty rule to which man always fails to attain, neither is it burdensome as some ascetics may indicate. Rather, it is a state which is beyond man’s reach entirely, but perfectly attained by the Man, Christ Jesus. Thus, faith in Him, His Word, His Person, His Work, will bring the spirit of a wayward sinner into the spiritual state of reconciliation with the Holy God. It is not that we achieve a level above all sin, but that our faith is counted as the Faith of Christ Jesus who did just that! Beyond that, we are given the blessed privilege of reconciling our day-to-day life to God, through understanding and application of the faith once delivered to the saints; hence, the apostolic plea, “. . . *as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God.*” 2 Cor. 5:20.

The theological presentation of reconciliation is beautiful, but as so many other terms and ideas, it may be twisted out of context and presented in a way never intended. Such is not the presentation of the harmonious scriptures, but the nonsense of a religious world that thinks it can deal with God’s Word anyway it wants.

FOR THOUGHT: How is it possible for condemned sinners to be reconciled to the Holy God? Does reconciliation go beyond initial repentance from sin to guidance of daily living?

It is easy to understand what reconciliation means as applied to one’s bank account, but does the righteous God have requirements so strong for human beings?

Does reconciliation mean living completely above sin in the flesh? What is to be done with such sins to remain reconciled to God?

REJOICE WHEN THE RACE IS FINISHED

The question is asked, is it possible to labor worthy of reward, then lose that which could have been received? Jesus answered one aspect of this question in Mark 9:4, *"For whosoever shall give you a cup of water to drink in my name, because ye belong to Christ, verily I say unto you, he shall not lose his reward."* There is no doubt but that a personal application is to be understood here. But there is another viewpoint every Christian should remember. It is stated in 2 John 8, *"Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward."* The apostle is here addressing churches of the Lord Jesus Christ. It must be noted that reward is never expressed in the plural number in the New Testament. This underscores that the church, the bride of Christ, is the principal inheritor of position, place, and standing with the bridegroom, Jesus. It also underscores that the greater meaning of reward is placement within that setting in the ages to come. So, the answer to the question is not simple, but compound. There is something that will not be lost, yet there is much to lose in failure to follow the Lord in accordance with His Holy Word.

A number of years ago, some of the swiftest runners were engaged in a race. One was in a comfortable lead as the finish line approached. It was then that a photographer called to the front runner to pause a second for a world class photograph before crossing the line. Feeling he had the time, the runner paused for the photo, but in doing so another overtook him and won the race. The runner thought the race was his, but distraction caused it to go to another.

The Christian race is not over until the finish line of death or the rapture is crossed. Until then, there is much to lose, much to win. It is illustrated by an old country adage, "don't count your chickens until they are hatched." Patience is required to keep on keeping on in the faith once delivered to the saints, but so soon the race will be irrevocably over. Then, what is, is! Until then, *"Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So, run, that ye may obtain."* 1 Cor. 9:24. So, onward let us run, content for glory to come later!

FOR THOUGHT: To whom do you think the majority of warnings in the scriptures are given? To the lost world or to the people of God?

Why should warnings be given to those who have been eternally saved?

Does reward make any difference in life now? Will it make a difference in life in eternity?

Are there good, discernable reasons why the Bible urges Christians to be dedicated, active, and big believers in the Bible?

RESIST THE DEVIL, HOW LONG?

Most folks understand a lifestyle of resistance to be negative, and they want little or nothing to do with it. After all, “you gotta accent the positive, eliminate the negative, and don’t mess with Mr. In-between!” Hey, that might make a song! Has it been forgotten that a positive cannot exist without a negative? Think about this with me.

Consider little Johnny. He is playing in the street. Mom yelled through the screen door, “Johnny, get out of the street!” Johnny sees this as a negative, and he does not know what to do next. In a few seconds he is right back in the street. Replay this scene. Mom yells at Johnny, “Johnny, get out of the street, and go play in the backyard.” Now the negative has been balanced with a positive, and Johnny will go play in the backyard (at least for a few minutes).

A negative Christianity alone will not work. Yet so many pride themselves in not lying today, or not cursing today! Those vices are sure to return ... soon! But consider what the verse of scripture under consideration actually says: *“Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”* James 4:7. The call to actively resist a negative, has been counterbalanced, and the person empowered by the positive, first part of the statement, “submit yourselves therefore to God.”

Now, consider Jesus. Immediately following His baptism, He was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. In every temptation the Devil thought he could use to allure Jesus to sin, Jesus successfully resisted with the Word of God; even specific scriptures which He quoted to win the victory.

God’s people may also know sweet victory over temptations when they first submit themselves to God and to His Word. In doing so, they will not only resist successfully, but they will also enjoy the righteous peace and sense of goodness and blessings that comes in each victory.

Some resist in their own power once or twice, then give in, sometimes because that is what they wanted to do in the first place. This does not underscore the weakness of God, but the foolishness of the flesh. So, how long should one resist? Resist until the devil leaves you. Don’t worry, it will not be long. He has other fish to fry and he knows he cannot win over a Bible quoting, Bible believing Christian.

FOR THOUGHT: What do you think of the power of balancing negative commands with a positive one?

Do you see this principle employed in the scriptures? Can you produce at least three of these that were spoken by Jesus?

RETHINKING THE TALE OF DEAD MEN

The proverb heard over and over is, “dead men tell no tales.” However, practical evidence abounds that this proverb is wrong, and needs to be righted. “Dead men do tell tales!” Think with me for a moment.

An estimated fifty thousand martyrs since the days of Jesus on earth testify that the Christian faith is worth dying for. Moreover, the uniform stones of a military cemetery declare that democracy and freedom are worth dying for. There is much biblical evidence that “dead men do tell tales!”

Wisdom comes to us from the voices of those who have gone before us. What is most important to them will be most important to each of us. So, what is the tale that dead men tell?

They tell of the foundational character of faith, that it is essential to salvation. Eph 2:8-9. That it is essential to a good relationship with God, Heb. 11:6; and that it is first in the order of spiritual gifts. I Cor. 13:13. Additionally, everything that is not of faith is sin. Rom. 14:23.

Dead men tell us of the potential power of faith in the believer. Matt. 17:20. And of its importance at death when the claim of the grave, the great equalizer of earthly distinctions, will not be denied. Here, genius, heroics, wealth, statesmanship, invention, philanthropy, etc., all fade into the background, and the all-important issue is, was this a person of faith in God?

Who are these dead men who tell such tales? Just to name a few, consider Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob, Joseph, Moses and his parents, Joshua, Rahab, and an innumerable host of others. Hebrews 11:4 points out Abel, who by faith offered a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, “. . . *by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and by it he being dead yet speaketh.*”

Furthermore, there is another who speaks through the vicissitudes of time. It is a certain rich man who lived contemporarily with Lazarus. Luke 16. Millenniums of time have come and gone, but he still is desirous of a drop of water on his burning tongue. He wants to warn others to not follow his path. Truly, dead men do have a tale to tell. Wise people listen and act appropriately.

FOR THOUGHT: What do you think of the tales that dead men tell?

Are these tales good philosophy, good preaching, or true warnings about real, eternal life?

If all one may take with him out of this world is what he believes, how high on the priority list should faith be?

How do you think the ancients were able to accept martyrdom?

SAVORING THE SLOP

“And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.” Luke 15:16-19.

Luke 15 records the familiar story of the prodigal son. When his substance was wasted, and no man gave him the needful things of life, he resorted to feeding the hogs for another, and would dip his hand in the slop bucket to eat some of the husks intended for pigs. It is so sad that he had to stoop to such a low level before realizing that real help and true love awaited him in his father's house. But sadder still is the continuous replaying of this story in modern times.

There are many human traits fostered far and wide as substitutes for the true blessings in the Heavenly Father's house. One is philosophy of the power of positive thinking. Oh, to be sure, there are some good things in this world that one may achieve in the power of positive thinking, but when one tries to extrapolate that into spiritual realities that come from God, it becomes a slop bucket. A few years ago, there were some notable preachers who made that theme to be the crux of their ministry. It sounded good to unspiritual ears. It pandered to those who prized self-sufficiency and despised repentance. Then after serving up a homily on the subject, those purveyors of spiritual poison would smile like a wave on a bucket of slop. Those who have slopped hogs in earlier years have no trouble visualizing this.

But if there are some good things in the power of positive thinking, what is wrong with such messages, one might ask. The Bible message is that there is no innate goodness in mankind. He is by nature a hell-bound sinner, and only the salvation wrought by the Lord Jesus Christ on the Cross of Calvary can change that. So, repentance and faith are the requirements, not the power of positive thinking. The apostle Paul explained this idea, and legalism in general, as *“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. Such are the ornaments of the broad way that leads to destruction. The way of life is the narrow way. Christ must be the foundation, the head, and everything in between. Otherwise, it is spiritual slop. I don't want it, won't have it, and even the pigs may have a real problem with it.

FOR THOUGHT: If what is taught in the name of the Lord is not Biblically supported, it is a lie. Is it then any better than spiritual slop, or could it be worse? Why?

Why is it that people will follow the sorry lifestyle of the prodigal son at the pigpen?

Do you think an awakening to the blessedness of spiritual life with God is a natural phenomenon or is it God who initially reaches out to fallen man? What is your personal experience?

SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES

It was once commonly believed, at least in the South, that no education was complete that did not include a sound and comprehensive understanding of the Holy Bible. It is not clear just when or where that fell by the wayside, but it is still cornerstone truth.

Centered in the first-floor hallway of the old facilities of Missionary Baptist Seminary on Asher Avenue in Little Rock, Arkansas, was the embedded seal of the school bearing the slogan: "Eronata Tas Graphas" or "Search the Scriptures." The well-known admonition of 2 Timothy 2:15 is "study" in order to be approved a workman who need not be ashamed, but who rightly divides the Word of Truth. That was heavily emphasized as the sole purpose and mission of the institution. Accordingly, for decades, it has been the pleasure of this writer to further emphasize Proverbs 25:2, *"It is the glory of God to conceal a thing: but the honour of kings is to search out a matter."* Correct Bible knowledge does not come easily or quickly, but its acquisition is the greatest treasure any mortal will ever have, and it is not, nor will it ever be, mortal! My friend and esteemed brother in Christ, Jim Harris of Florida, wrote the following words that I am pleased to pass along to you.

"God planted a vineyard of truth that requires the believer to harvest its fruit. God buried gold in the mine of the Bible that requires the believer to dig it out. God embedded light, direction, and guidance in Scripture that requires the believer to search for it.

The Bible is not fast food for the drive-thru Christian. It is not slogans and terminology coupled with pictures of the sunrise or the beach posted on social media. The Bible requires work to understand. It requires time to get to know. There is reward beyond comprehension in the understanding of this book. It is not a delicate, fragile volume. It is the foundation upon which the world stands. It is the workhorse of human history. It has been attacked, berated, belittled, and hated, yet it stands as true and trustworthy as it was in the days the ink was still wet. It speaks the truth because it is the truth. It can be completely, fully, eternally trusted." Amen, Brother Jim Harris! I could not have said it better!

FOR THOUGHT: How important is Bible knowledge today to an excellent education? Why? Do you think a lot of Christians esteem the Bible as a "take it or leave it" proposition? Do you think it is all right for folks in the pew to be ignorant of the Word so long as the minister or pastor is well educated? Why? Could it be that accountability of one's life to Jesus at Judgment will go through a pastor or friend, or will it be strictly on a personal basis?

SEEKING KNOWLEDGE OF RESURRECTION POWER

There is an attainment in life that is alien to planet Earth. It outranks all other possible possessions in worthiness of pursuit. Among men, gold, silver, diamonds, and pearls are universally accepted as wealth, and the years of life are given to acquire them and what they represent. But there is another that pales the treasures of earth. Think with me for a minute.

Prerequisites are essential to the ability to pursue the treasure of which I write. Being born from above and committed to obediently following God in New Covenant relationship are those prerequisites that open the door to that opportunity. Think of it in the context of the apostle Paul.

God used Paul as He did no other. Paul also had things men seek in life, the best education, friends in high places, and rank in his Pharisaical world, to name a few. Yet, in Philippians Chapter Three, he listed some of those, but went on to say they were all counted but loss, even as a pile of dung, in comparison to the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus. He wanted above all other things to know Him better, and especially the power of His resurrection.

At the Easter season, the world called "Christendom" celebrates the resurrection of Jesus. But few understand its possibility. Jesus was a man, but He was also the Creator God of the universe. Since the wages of sin is death, it was possible for the man Jesus, who knew no sin, to die, only because he voluntarily took upon Himself the sins of men. Although the man Jesus was formed of flesh and blood of this world, the life in the man Jesus was the eternal God Himself. It is not possible for Him to die. But it was possible for the God who lived in the man Jesus to voluntarily exit, then re-enter, the human body of Jesus, changing it into a glorified state. That has specific and profound meaning to His people.

The Spirit of the Living God which dwells in His people is life, and it is not possible for it to die. To this point Jesus forthrightly declared: *"And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?"* John 11:26. The everlasting life Jesus gives to those who repent of sin and accept Him as their personal Savior begins at the moment that happens. It never ends and cannot end because it is everlasting. What that means is that though death claims the flesh on earth, the life-force or spirit returns to God who gave it, to await the command of the Master to reunite in a glorified body like unto His own. The interim is not inactive, but chock full of glorious awareness that pales that of earth. Hallelujah! We join Paul in pursuit of a better knowledge of that, his prime directive. He lives! We live!

FOR THOUGHT: Is it reality or just good preaching that there is much to know about the process of salvation of the total man?

If Paul realized there was much to learn that he had not apprehended, is that not true for us? Do we do ourselves a disservice by simply acquiescing to our ignorance rather than seek to understand the marvelous spiritual possibilities?

Do you think Christians today count anything at all as loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ?

SELL ME THIS POWER

“But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you:. . .” Acts 1:8.

In biblical Christianity there is power! Saints sing of it often in such hymns as “There Is Power in The Blood.” Repentant lost people rejoice in it at the altar of their heart. Saints who are wise reject the time-consuming offerings of the world in favor of knowing Him and the POWER of His resurrection, as did St. Paul, as he told the Philippians.

Jesus said that all power is consolidated in Him, as He commissioned the church in Matthew 28:18-20. Just before ascending into heaven, He told His church that they would receive power after that the Holy Ghost was come upon them. According to Acts 2, they certainly did. But it was not a temporary power. It was an age long power to be resident in New Testament churches; power sufficient to bring them through the age with the proper testimony of God, and His love for the world.

But power is one of the objects of the sinful, greedy world which sees material advancement as the purpose of life. Thus, the very existence of understood power draws men either to God and salvation, or to Satan and the ladder of materialism and creature comforts.

Such was the case of one Simon the sorcerer, as noted in Acts 8. It is interesting to note that Simon was a long-time practitioner of sorcery. Doubtless, he accumulated a considerable amount of wealth with it. However, the introduction of Bible Christianity in Samaria was mightily blessed of God, so that many were saved and baptized. Make of this what you will, the Bible declares that Simon also was saved and baptized. Simon then continued with Philip, drawn by the miracles which he did.

Some days later, Peter and John were dispatched from Jerusalem to Samaria, who prayed for them, and laid hands upon them; and they received the Holy Spirit that had come upon the church in Acts 2. Simon was impressed, so impressed that he offered the apostles money to have their power conferred upon him. Peter minced no words rejecting the request and directing him to repent of such wickedness. 8:22-24.

Unarguably, the apostolic years were filled with extraordinary displays of holy power as credentials of holy men in the absence of the completed New Testament. But with its completion, focus is shifted more precisely upon the church of the Living God. It is the pillar and ground of the truth, under the constriction of the Holy Spirit and the eternal Word. In these things there is staying, aggressive, authoritative, energetic power from heaven. Surely, the world remains filled with satanic inspired charlatans, who emulate Simon, saying, “sell me this power that I may accumulate wealth through deception.” But, as it was then, so it is now. The gifts and calling of God may be only enjoyed God’s way. They are not for sale.

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think there are marketers presently who are selling religion? Why was the apostle Peter so blunt and possibly harsh in answering Simon? Do you believe life in eternity depends on what is done with life here and now? Is it possible for saved, but untaught people to make serious spiritual errors?

SERVING GOD AND MAMMON OR SERVING GOD WITH MAMMON?

The most interesting story is related by Jesus to His disciples in Luke 16:1-9. Read it! It is the story of the unjust steward. No small number of misinterpretations have come from that story, particularly from those who seek to justify themselves in wallowing in materialism and/or dealing in less than honest transactions. The lesson is pungent! The point is unmistakable to those acquainted with the Word. Think about it with me!

Center stage, or the protagonist of the story, is a steward (manager of the affairs of another). He was not just a steward, but it is emphasized that he was an unjust steward, charged with mismanagement of his lord's material goods. Realizing his stewardship would soon end, he initiated action to encourage at least partial payment to his lord while making friends of the debtors who would look upon him kindly in his time of need. Ultimately, his own lord commended his wise, though personal actions.

It is here that Jesus makes an application. The children of this world are wiser in their generation (kind, type) than the children of light. Now hold on just a minute! Why would Jesus make such a statement? First, He said it because it is true. Everything Jesus said is true. Secondly, the unjust steward took care of himself, favoring others through the crafty use of mammon. Jesus is saying to His disciples, and to us all, that we cannot serve God and mammon, but we can and must serve God by the wise use of mammon. This is not serving mammon, rather it is making mammon to serve God and man. The practical form that takes is, in the words of Jesus, "Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness." In simple, modern terms, He is saying to use money wisely to make friends because one day you will probably need what others can do for you.

Some would have folks to believe that the only way to serve God with money is through church offerings. Not so! James 1:27 states that pure religion, that which is undefiled before God, consists of visiting (helping) widows and orphans. Use mammon then to serve God in that way. Truly, the parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us that much service that is pleasing to God consists of helping others in their time of need. Christians must not forget that although the first great commandment is to love God, the second is like unto it, love thy neighbor as thyself. This year, discover the joy of practically serving God in accordance with the first two great commandments.

FOR THOUGHT: As a Christian, does not all you have, or may have in the future, belong to God?

Did God not require a tenth of increase from Israel in the Old Testament?

Does not the New Testament teach us to do more if our service to God is acceptable?

Name two specific experiences of joy you found in helping others.

SHUT-IN OR SHUT-OUT??

“Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able. When once the master of the house is risen up, and hath shut to the door, and ye begin to stand without, and to knock at the door, saying, Lord, Lord, open unto us; and he shall answer and say unto you, I know you not whence ye are: Then shall ye begin to say, We have eaten and drunk in thy presence, and thou hast taught in our streets. But he shall say, I tell you, I know you not whence ye are; depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out.” Luke 13:24-28.

To whom do these sobering sayings apply? They are identified as religious folks who ignore willfully the teachings of the Holy Word in favor of what they consider desirable and nice. Here, Jesus is not talking about spiritual salvation, rather about salvation of the mind-life, or reward, of those who are spiritually saved. While it is called TODAY, men have the opportunity to enter the strait gate of heaven's imparted way of righteous living. There will come a time when that opportunity will be forever gone. It will be then that men who are spiritually saved will seek a place of honor in the millennial kingdom of the Lord but will be told that they were never in an approved relationship of service with Him. They are saved people, or else they would not be there asking or knocking. However, Jesus simply refers to them as “workers of iniquity!” That term specifically means procedure without regard to accepted instructions, or simply anarchy or lawlessness in spiritual matters.

So, some will be blessed to come from the east, west, north, and south, and sit down in the kingdom with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Also, some who seek to do that, thinking they have a right to that privilege, will be thrust out of that blessed setting. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth among those who finally realize the Bible is the accepted rule of faith and practice, and not themselves. Indeed, there is reward; there are blessings which some will have, and others will be denied, based on the obedience of their life to God's Word. On that day, some will be shut-in, others will be shut-out (no, not out of heaven, but out of places of honor in the kingdom). While it is TODAY, let us all hear Jesus and strive to enter the strait gate and narrow way.

FOR THOUGHT: What does the “strait gate” represent to you?

If it is thought to be spirit salvation which is by grace alone, how could “striving” be a part of it?

If one is to strive to enter, does that not mean continued learning and walking in the things that are of the Lord as presented in the New Testament?

May one be thrust out of a place of honor in the kingdom of heaven and still be saved?

How may these questions be reconciled?

STANDING FAST: IN MODERN TIMES

Not a few ministers can tell of perceived pillars in the church who assured them that in the event of disturbance over an issue they would be there, right behind them. But, when disturbance actually came, they were behind them all right, maybe forty or fifty miles. Such is the failing of the flesh, even as Peter found out when avowing to never desert the Lord, only to find himself denying Him while warming by the enemy's fire.

Wisdom would have all of God's people to realize their weaknesses and seek heavenly strength to stand for the Lord when such need arises. The beloved apostle Paul wrote to several churches in his epistles about their need to know to Whom they belonged, and to seek the ability to stand when standing really counted. To the churches of Galatia, he wrote, *"Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage."* Gal. 5:1. To the church at Ephesus, he wrote, *"Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness."* To the church at Philippi, he wrote, *"Therefore, my brethren, dearly beloved and longed for, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, my dearly beloved."* Then to the church at Thessalonica, he wrote, *"Therefore brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle."* 2 Thess, 2:15.

To illustrate this admonition, a little boy climbed onto a very poor, old horse .sway-backed with ribs protruding. But the horse was to him a most beautiful animal. A neighbor, given to making fun, asked him if his horse was a racehorse. The boy answered, "No." Then the man asked if he were a work horse. Again, the boy answered, "No." Next, the man asked if the horse could run fast. The boy answered, "No sir, he cannot run fast, but he sure can stand fast."

As God's witnesses there is an underscored need for us all to resist the din, noise, and perceived gaiety of the world, and stand fast in the marvelous liberty with which Christ Jesus has made us free. This is accomplished by clinging to a proper understanding of the inerrant Word.

Revisiting the apostolic admonition to the Ephesians, we hear again the precious Word, *"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."* Eph. 6:13-14. Then here is the most appropriate admonition for then and now!

FOR THOUGHT: What does "standing fast" mean to you?

Name at least four Bible teachings for which a Christian should always stand fast.

Does a specific, one time, failure to stand fast mean one cannot stand fast? Explain!

What are some common, yielded to temptations that would keep one from standing fast?

STOPPING THE PRAYER STOPPERS

In the field of communications, what would you give for a direct line to the Creator of the universe? Well, by His grace, that is what Christians have, and it is better, far more reliable and productive than a cell phone. Who would ignore, discount, or willingly not use such a connection? Yet, some complain of unanswered prayer. So, just what is it that could be responsible for prayers being divinely marginalized? Think about it!

Perhaps it could be as ancient Isaiah reported to Israel in Isaiah 59:2, "Your sins have hid His face from you, that He will not hear." Dare one approach the throne of grace harboring unrepented sins? They are prayer stoppers! King David of old said in Psalm 66:18, "If I regard iniquity (religious activity and beliefs foreign to the scriptures) in my heart, the Lord will not hear me." Iniquity is a widespread, grievous error, doing things one's own way instead of specifically God's way. It is the assumption man fabricates, and proceeds upon, as the will of God. It is a prayer stopper!

Furthermore, God gave some negative information to Jeremiah about his own praying for Israel. *"Therefore pray not thou for this people, neither lift up a cry or prayer for them: for I will not hear them in the time that they cry unto me for their trouble."* Jer. 11:14. Their communication had been cut off because of their sins, judgment was about to fall, and the godly prophet who could effectively pray was not to pray for them. They had repeatedly employed a prayer stopper.

What to do? The answer is obvious. Realize that prayer is not a birthright, and God is not a messenger boy anxiously awaiting a call of whatever from whomever.

Prayers that are heard come from those of a penitent attitude, and of a contrite heart. This state of being is befitting any approach to the very Creator-Redeemer of the universe!

FOR THOUGHT: What is the problem with prayers that are only offered in times of trouble by people walking far afield from the teachings of Jesus?

What did David mean by his statement in Psalm 66:18?

Should prayer always begin with a confession of sins, and a true readiness to do God's will?

What do you believe to be prayer stoppers? Name some!

TARRYING BY THE STUFF

“And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his several ability; and straightway took his journey.” Matthew 25:15.

Three references are hereby made regarding the idea of “tarrying by the stuff.” Please think with me about them!

First is the setting of the terminology in I Samuel 25 and 30. King David went to war with 400 men but left 200 to abide by the stuff. In the parting of the booty, some wanted to exclude those who tarried by the stuff, but David said their work was important and they would receive an equal share.

Second, the story Jesus told regarding a lord who took a far journey, but parted his goods among his servants, with instructions to “occupy until I come.” Some doubled their allotment while one hid his, so as not to lose anything. His action was denounced rather than commended, and he lost what he might have profited from his master. In each case, whether the term employed is “tarry” or “occupy”, the idea is the same. Both terms indicate one is to be present, on guard, and active in the responsibilities given.

Third is the application of the above terms and actions to our great country, the United States of America, whose independence we celebrate. It has been the lot of some to go to war to gain its independence, while others fought to keep it. But what about the rest of us? It is our lot to occupy, to tarry by the stuff (the principles of freedom) in which we so lavishly bask. What kind of job is being done in that occupation, in the tarrying. Those who tarry by the stuff must not abandon it to the wanton raiding of others, nor bury it in hopes of preserving it.

Finally, all who take the name of Christ Jesus to themselves are called both to fight a good warfare, and to tarry by the stuff, occupying until the Lord comes. This writer believes it impossible to accept as optional the commands of Christian service in all of its various forms, including Bible reading, church attendance, prayer, and witnessing. This is the stuff of our warfare against principalities and powers. This is the stuff we are to occupy for increase for the Master. There is no commendation for those who bury their stuff.

May God give us all a renewed sense of urgency to occupy in faithful activity; to tarry guardedly and rightfully by the stuff that is given to us of heaven itself.

FOR THOUGHT: Have you ever thought of your lot in life as one who should be faithful to “tarry by the stuff” (principles) as keeping faith with those who gave the last full measure of devotion? Name some of the things you think those who have died would want you to be faithful to do. How important is it to you that you are found faithful in “tarrying by the stuff?”

THE CHISEL

In communication exchanges of life experiences with my dear cousin, Sandra Thieme, of Colorado, she mentioned the idea of a chisel. I cannot get this off my mind, mainly because it makes so much sense. Accordingly, I attempt to expand on that idea for my own analysis and I hope it may make some sense to others who read these lines.

How prone we are to live life to the fullest, but as much as humanly possible within our comfort zone. When something invades our comfort zone, it is always by an external force, and not of our own making. We are secure in who we are, identify ourselves by the peripheral things and people around us, especially those we have known for a lifetime.

When a parent, sibling, or child dies we feel ourselves chiseled. But we must understand that we really are as a sculptured work of art, fashioned by the Master Artist, and fully realize that He is not done with those of us who remain. When one of my children was still-born, it was as a chisel strike that I would have avoided at all costs, but one that brought more clearly into focus the fashioning of my life by my loving and righteous Creator-God. When a mid-life crisis struck, the chisel had never struck so hard and so painfully to shape my life to solely depend on my loving Sculptor. Then dad died in 1987. The chisel struck again, painfully, but masterfully, further defining what I am to ultimately become. When mom died in 1988, it was a chisel blow. When my sister died in 2000, the chisel struck again. She was the first of my siblings to cross the bar, and I felt so vulnerable; that there was less of me than before. Then, my brother, just older than I, succumbed to a massive stroke, and I again felt the strike of a chisel. There was love between us, even though we were not so close in later years as we had been as youngsters growing up. Since then, the chisel struck again as my oldest brother died. For so long, all these precious people were there, and I knew it, and to some degree depended upon it. It was my comforting, self-definition of life. In their absence, I feel the chiseled blows from which no one is immune, even ministers of the gospel.

I do not seek immunity from the chisel, nor do I lament each blow, as it may appear that I do. It is just that life is ever changing, and those who love the Lord will feel the chisel as He uses events of life to channel us into complete trust, and comfort in Him, rather than in the people and things that surround us. One day the Master Sculptor will be done with the chisel, and changes will cease to occur, for we shall see Him as He is, because, at last, we shall be like Him. Until then, may God give each of us the strength and grace to be still, and to cherish each blow of the chisel in the comforting knowledge of what He is doing to, and for, each one of us. 2 Thessalonians 3:5.

FOR THOUGHT: What life events have occurred that you consider the blows of a chisel?

Name some that were hard to accept and make adjustments.

Do you see yourself being shaped with every chisel blow that occurs?

Do you trust God to shape you into the most glorious work you can be for His glory?

THE CHURCH-GOING GENERATION

“King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest. Then Agrippa said unto Paul, Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.” Acts 26:27-28.

From early days, the United States of America has been generally known by the world as a Christian nation. To be sure, there were many times and episodes in its history that would bring that idea into question. Still, following the great revivals of the early 19th century, that label largely stuck, but predominantly in the Southern Bible belt more than in the other regions. This will draw some flack but hear me out.

A few years ago, the president of the United States stood before a gathering of leaders from many nations and forthrightly declared that America was NOT a Christian nation. A fire storm of repudiation ensued from folks at home.

I shall refrain from the many temptations of digression that present themselves for the greater purpose in mind. Could he have been correct? I think it all depends upon what one considers a Christian to be.

To perhaps 90% of what is called the “Christian World” the definition of a Christian is one who confesses that Jesus is the Son of God. Truly, repentance from sin and faith in Him brings eternal salvation to the spirit of the individual. But faith in God has wrought individual salvation since Eden, and none of the Old Testament saints are biblically known as Christians. What are we to make of it all? Please think with me!

The disciples of Jesus were first called Christians at Antioch (Acts 11). They did not call themselves that, but the general populace dubbed them with that title. Those were a Greek speaking people and knew exactly what they were meaning by the term. It is dedicated discipleship (followership) by which those saved people were recognized and entitled.

The disciples at Antioch were 1) saved by grace through faith; 2) baptized by the first church by immersion in water; 3) honored the Word of God by teaching the biblical landmarks that guided their life. These included the above requisites plus eternal security of the believer, the authority of the church to spread the gospel and administer the ordinances Jesus put into it. As one is dedicated to these things and grows in the Word, he will be a New Testament Christian. Did this just decimate the popular idea of Christianity? Doubtless!

When folks align themselves with a religious organization without thought or research of the Biblical model, they become a Christian in colloquial name only, and are devoid of any meaningful honesty with their Creator as it is revealed in His eternal Word. Such gives rise to evangelism being reduced to an invitation to “our church” and its programs rather than to the all-important, individual relationship with God, both in salvation, and in dedicated, acceptable service.

Maybe, just maybe, that Muslim pleasing president was unwittingly right. Simply put, a nation of churchgoers does not a Christian make!

FOR THOUGHT: Since salvation by grace is as old as Eden, does it not follow that today a person may be spiritually saved, but not known as a Christian by persistent inactivity in the teachings of Christ? Amplify this thought!

What do you think the general populace of Antioch were thinking when they called the disciples of Jesus “Christian?” Did their dedicated activity have anything to do with it?

How is it possible today to be considered a Christian, but remain inactive in the things of Christ? Might one be very active in a church, but apart from personal relationship with Christ? How does that fit with the appellation “Christian?”

THE COMPOUNDED EYE

As a small child in the community of Jenny Lind, Arkansas, a particular delight infrequently occurred by having a nickel to spend at one of three local stores. Clark and Bailey General Store sat on the west side of the highway traversing the community, and Presto Skinner's store, later Griffin's, sat on the east side directly across from Clark's. South about a block was Marion Matthews' General Store. They were small buildings as most country stores were in the 1940s, but each of them had a large, glass, candy counter displaying all manner of delectable delights. Spending the nickel was not going to be easy because it demanded a decision to select one above all the others that must be left behind. With nose flattened against the glass, the chore began. Imaginary tasting of each potential selection took a while, much to the impatience of the proprietor. Finally, a choice was made, a purchase completed, and a happy kid walked out of the store with his sweet prize tickling taste buds on the walk home. What does this have to do with anything? Think with me!

Good decision making requires correct, studied information, and good judgment to achieve a single eye. The prophet Elijah saw so many of his countrymen caught in the trap of the compounded eye. I Kings 18. His challenge to them was, *"How long halt ye between two opinions?"* They could not serve God and Baal. Their eye of life was compounded, and as Jesus taught, they were full of darkness. Matt. 6:22-23. That continues today as the religious offerings have increased exponentially together with a thousand other things vying for time and attention, offering promises that may or may not be true.

Your life is your nickel, and the world is filled with a myriad of offerings, brightly colored and touting themselves to be worthy of your interest and your years. It is the fool who spends it frivolously, but spend it each one will, while often the compounded eye remains, or is narrowed in focus wrongly. So long as one's eye is compounded, full potential will never be achieved, and those whose eye is single, but focused on the wrong things, will suffer eternal loss. Life is your nickel. Be very careful how you spend it; what you focus on as truly important. Narrowing the compounded eye to single vision with eternal hope can only be accomplished as Jesus, His person, words, and works are the focus!

FOR THOUGHT: How important is it to you that the focus of life-purpose be single?
Do you have acquaintances whose inability to make hard decisions interfered with success?
In an age when most everyone has to be quite good at many things, how may one stay focused on spiritual matters as most important?
What do people who have achieved mastery in arts or science have in common?

THE CONCEPT OF A CROWN

“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 Timothy 4:8.

The term “Crown” is an interesting word. In the New Testament it comes from the ancient Greek term, “Stephanos.” That term means “that which surrounds.” Now, you know what the name “Stephen” means.

It is amazing how many people still think of a crown as only a sort of headdress, a special cap or beanie adorning the head. Of course, there are some instances where that applies, as in the crown of a king, the crown of thorns Jesus wore, etc., but those things are merely emblematic, representative of a much larger reality. So, in keeping with the basic meaning of the term, one should look beyond the emblem to the reality it represents.

A quick survey of the Bible will yield many instances in support of this point. The crown of Joseph was the honor and glory of receiving a double portion of inheritance in Israel by his sons, each heading a tribe. Genesis 49:26. A virtuous woman is a crown to her husband. Prov. 12:4. Grandchildren are the crown of old men. Prov. 17:6. The hoary head is a crown of glory. Prov. 16:31. In the New Testament, the Philippians were Paul’s crown of joy. Paul declared that a crown of righteousness was laid up for him. 2 Tim.4:8. Other New Testament books refer to a crown of glory, a crown of life, a crown of righteousness.

Each of the crowns here mentioned, as well as others, too, are gifts and attributes of conscious life. They connote the atmosphere and consciousness that dominate awareness. Truly, this merits much study, deep meditation, and unreserved dedication to the walk of life that will result in such final reality. There are crowns (surroundings of life) in the here and now, and there are crowns (surroundings of consciousness and awareness) in the hereafter. The latter will never end. Surely, any thinking person would want as many of these things as possible to be predominant around him in his eternal state.

It then becomes important to know that no offspring of Adam merits such. These are only possible in Christ. Please, please discard the erroneous idea that the new birth experience is all that is necessary to please the Lord and receive such crowns. These things are the eternal reward of life, well lived to the honor of God. In Christ (knowledge of and proper activity in the things of Christ Jesus), they will be both real and everlasting. Because the crowns we shall have hereafter are the crowns we weave around us today, we should all remain serious, perpetual students in the University of Christ Jesus, that we may indeed “know” Him and serve Him acceptably. Personally, I want all the crowns I can have to symbolically cast at the feet of the Savior!

FOR THOUGHT: What is the joyful meaning of your life that you consider a crown?
Are you working to achieve mastery in spiritual matters, especially in relationship with God and man, so that your life becomes full of good reflections?
What crowns do you want to have in your life? Name some of them.

THE COVENANT OR THE BOTTLE?

To avoid hypocrisy, one horn of a dilemma should drop! I refer to what is called “The Church Covenant”, framed and hanging on most Missionary Baptist Church House walls, contrasted with the elevation to which alcohol now stands in far too many churchmen. Now, do you want to think with me for a moment?

A hypocrite is one who professes one thing and consistently belies it with an opposite. The hypocrisy under consideration is the honored document labeled “Church Covenant” which plainly states that members of this church agree to abstain from alcohol as a beverage. The problem is, alcohol may be found in many church members’ homes, where it is consumed as a beverage. The contradiction is clear and simple.

This article is not a decry of the existence of alcohol. God made it just like He made everything else. But there is a purpose in everything. The purpose of alcohol is medicinal, not recreational. The very definition of sin is “missing the mark” or the misuse of purpose.

Of course, the alcohol beverage argument is quite old. Nationally, it was settled in the days of prohibition, but churches have long decried its dastardly wreckage and death of lives so dear. Hardly a family nowadays escapes the sorrow it brings both to individuals and families. And, while the sad loss continues, it is not foreseen that this drug will soon be eliminated from the culture, or from the sanctity of church folks who much prefer to look the other way than risk the loss of favor of members, and the benefit they may be financially and numerically to the organization.

As counties in Arkansas fall to the “wet” vote one by one, they do so by the passive no-vote as well as the active yes-vote of Baptists who exist in sufficient number to vote it down, but whose practical actions, or lack thereof, install it. It is not an admirable record, and its contribution to the destruction of so many lives will weigh heavily on those who give it their consent. (Humm, am I my brother’s keeper?)

But, back to the original theme of the article. Silence in conversation, homily, or lesson is not absolution to those who understand the issue. Churches that display the “Church Covenant” should be prompted to make a decision. If they profess to believe what it says, but refuse to teach its principles, it may be time for hard decision making. Shall the “Church Covenant” be taken down and relegated to the trash can or is it time for church folks to live up to what they profess to believe by their lifestyle? Decisions mark the way forward. Which path is the best choice? Elijah once asked, *“How long halt ye between two opinions?”*

FOR THOUGHT: Does the common “Church Covenant” carry the same authority as the Bible? What is the problem in churches that display the covenant, but fail to preach its concepts? Do you agree that many of the problems in today’s society in general, and churches in particular, exist because of the unwillingness of church folk to take a stand against such? It is said, “You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar” as an excuse for looking the other way at common sins. How does this play out with Bible teachings?

THE CRIB FILLED OR CLEAN?

"Where no oxen are, the crib is clean: but much increase is by the strength of the ox."

Proverbs 14:4.

The term "crib" may be variously understood as a stall, a granary, a manger or more, generally, a barn. Using the more general understanding "barn", it may be noted that three things relating to the ox are there: 1) a stall into which animals were brought for feeding; 2) a manger from which the animals would eat; 3) a separate room for the storage of grain.

Practically speaking, if there were no oxen on ancient farms, there would be no need for food in the manger. It would be clean. Moreover, no crops would have been planted and harvested; hence, the granary room would be clean. Additionally, in the absence of oxen, the floor of the stall would be clean. But increase was desired. The granary must be filled. But if it were not clean, neither would the other two parts of the barn be clean.

So, material increase meant the presence and use of the oxen; investment in food for the oxen; shovel power applied to the stall, and hard work invested in harvest.

Are you getting the idea? In today's society, and in churches as well, people want the end product, but they do not want to deal with the details of getting it. However, every increase has its price. Some want to play musical instruments, but not practice. Others want to be the CEO of a corporation, but do not want to spend years in education or apprenticeship. Some want to be an accomplished pastor, preacher, teacher, but do not want to spend years in prayerful study of the Word or experience the exercise of initial stumbling. Sadly enough, a lot of churches want to have a large membership, but do not want to invest time, prayer, and teaching to build a solid congregation. Later, they wonder in amazement when trouble comes, and it falls apart.

Truly, ours is a short-cut society filled with shortcut churches. But there is no shortcut to that which is truly an increase. The Great Commission is God's plan. It works, when worked. Short-cut it or abandon it, and the spiritual crib of God's House will be clean (empty), but much increase is by reason of Christian workers working God's plan.

FOR THOUGHT: Have you ever been a part of a group whose mindset seemed to be, "Let somebody else do it?" Was that your mindset, too?

What are the problems associated with increase without personal investment?

What parallels do you draw from Proverbs 14:4?

THE CRUX OF CLOSED COMMUNION

“For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come. Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause, many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep.” I Corinthians 11:26-30.

True Baptists believe in Closed Communion as opposed to Open Communion or even Close Communion. Most teachers emphasize the local nature of the church, and/or its disciplinary authority, both of which are good, but seem to zip over the head of so many in the pew. Let's take another look.

There is a warning about observing communion, or as Baptists like to say, “The Lord's Supper.” The warning is to not partake of it unworthily. Those so doing shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord, according to I Corinthians 11:27.

Let the reader be reminded of the difference between an adjective and an adverb. “Unworthy” is an adjective, describing the participant. “Unworthily” is an adverb describing the action of the verbs “shall eat and shall drink.” No one could consider himself worthy, but everyone participating in the Supper must do it worthily.

So, what constitutes “worthily?” Since the information regarding the observance of the Supper is always given in church context, “worthily” is predicated upon participants being born from above and having received scriptural New Testament baptism. Moreover, they must be a member in good standing of the church observing the Supper, but that is not all.

The emphasis in I Corinthians 11:28 is that one is to examine himself, especially in light of these requirements, and others similar to Jesus' teaching in His Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5:24.

The specific warning of observing the Supper unworthily is “damnation” (condemnation) to oneself, explained as “not discerning the Lord's body.” Such had already brought sickness and death among the Corinthians.

Finally, what is meant by the important phrase, “not discerning the Lord's body?” Well, think a minute!

No one living has seen the physical body of Jesus. So-called portraits of Him are just that. But the Lord has a body that is often referenced in the scriptures. It is the body of which He is the head, His Living, New Testament Church, which is always a local expression!

FOR THOUGHT: Why do you think the doctrine of closed communion is often misunderstood? Do you think ministers or churches have the liberty of God to ignore biblical context on anything?

If communion or the Lord's Supper is set in church context, what is wrong with individual or family communion such as in hospitals, etc.

Do you think it is better to abstain from communion rather than take it unworthily? Why?

THE EYE, THE LIGHT, AND THE LIFE

Everybody knows at least one of them! I refer to the proverbial “Jack of all trades.” However, as the old saying continues “... master of none!” In various career fields, it is vastly important that the pursuer focus singularly on the details of that discipline. This is no less true in acceptable discipleship of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Bible students will be reminded that Jesus said, *“The light of the body is the eye: when thine eye is single, thy whole body is full of light; but when thine eye is evil, thy body also is full of darkness.”* Luke 11:34. Thus in proportion to the degree of focus (the eye) will the seeker find light (understanding), and the reverse is also true in the measure of darkness (ignorance).

It was a darkened (ignorant) world into which Jesus came. He forthrightly declared that to be the point of condemnation. *“And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.”* John 3:19. John went on to record, *“In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.”* John 1:4-5.

His resident life is the light of men! How marvelous! Those who do not know Him in faith do not have this all-important light; hence, they walk on in darkness, not knowing where they are going. Every Christian ought to bow in thanksgiving to God for the light of life infused by the Holy Spirit through the eternal Word. It is always bright. It consistently lights up one’s pathway and allows the avoidance of so many pitfalls that would bring destruction. The beloved apostle went on to write in I John 1:5-7, *“This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.”* The eye, the light, and the life, what an immeasurably marvelous correlation. Come, let us walk together in His glorious light!

FOR THOUGHT: What makes you recoil in conversation with a “Jack of all trades?”
May one be smart indeed in earthly things, but ignorant in spiritual matters?
What happens when unspiritual, but smart people make decisions about the Bible?
Have you experienced a personal awakening to some spiritual points about which you were wrong?

THE FAITH ONCE DELIVERED TO THE SAINTS!

Our dear brother, Jude, wrote in his epistle, *“Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.”* V. 3.

Here, the writer targets two subject matters, the latter of which receives by far the greater attention. Those two subjects are the common salvation, and how to deal with, overtly and responsively, the faith once delivered unto the saints.

The common salvation references the salvation of the spirit of man. It is called common because it is unrestricted and had been occurring since the Garden of Eden. In it all of God’s people rejoice as it is spiritual life, foundational to any advancement in knowledge and maturity in the kingdom work of God. However, it is just exactly that. It is not the destination, but the first step of a journey.

There is a system of faith called the faith; a system of doctrines which was once (for all time) delivered unto the saints. Through the centuries of the age, devoted men in the churches of the Living God have set their hand to encapsulate that faith in documents called confessions. While there may be variance in those of a valid standing, the core doctrines of the New Testament from which there can be no turning away is always there. These are namely: 1) the inherent depravity of the total man, or all without exception are sinners. 2) Salvation is by grace through faith plus nothing else. 3) The eternal security of the believer, or in the vernacular, once saved, always saved, will be there. 4) Baptism of a professed believer is immersion in water by the authority of a New Testament church. 5) Baptism and communion or the Lord’s Supper are church ordinances of each and every local body. While many more are often mentioned, and they are important, these core doctrines are the hallmark of New Testament churches and have been for the past two thousand years.

Jude emphatically states that we should be contenders for this historical system labeled the faith. To contend does not necessarily mean contentious, but that churches should not be removed from it. They should be known by the same, which is sometimes referred to as “landmarks of faith.” Moreover, contending for them should be done “earnestly.” This adverb qualifies the phrase “should contend” as being diligent, sincere, steadfast, doing better than the average. To this end the Spirit of God abides in the church and it empowers the mature members to meet the onslaught of evil people dressed as sheep; illustrated by the rioters who came out of Egypt and the angels that kept not their first estate. It really matters, big time, what one truly believes.

FOR THOUGHT: Are you able to verbalize the difference between “faith,” and “the faith?” Name four or five core doctrines that have always identified New Testament churches. What does “once delivered to the saints” mean to you? Do you see any room for taking liberties with “the faith” to render alternative meanings?

THE GREAT ESSENTIAL EQUALIZER

To think in terms of equalizing is an admission or foregone conclusion that all things are not equal. Some things do stand in such need. For instance, mechanisms of defense are often thought of as equalizers. An older, weakened individual may not stand a chance against the strength of youth with a knife in his hand, but the weaker one may say he has an equalizer, pointing to a loaded pistol. Still others see the grave as the great equalizer. Whether one is rich or poor, highly educated, or ignorant, the grave awaits all, thus it is the great equalizer. These are very limited viewpoints of what is equal. Please entertain your mind on this subject with me.

While studying for a sermon some time ago, I saw something in familiar passages of scripture that I had overlooked before, and it speaks to the potential of the equality of men by which they are acceptable to God. It was right there all the time in James 2:21-25. James used two Old Testament examples as he argued the point of necessity of faith and works combining to reflect God's work in men.

The first example used was Abraham, and his offering of Isaac. "*Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?*" Verse 22. The enormity of Abraham's faith earned for him the imputation of God's righteousness and the title, "the friend of God." The second example is that of Rahab, the harlot. Her work in receiving, concealing and directing the Hebrew spies safely out of Jericho were actions of faith, and by the implementation of that faith, she and her family were saved from death, and she became a link in the lineage of Christ Jesus.

But what a contrast! Others could have been mentioned, but these were the chosen ones. There is little comparison between Abraham and Rahab, but there is significant contrast! Yet, there is an equalizer. It is called faith, and its accompanying works. This speaks to all of God's children throughout the ages that the extremities in men must be equalized in the person, words, and works of Christ to be acceptable to God, and rewarded appropriately. Has your spirit been saved by repentance and faith in Christ? Then are you allowing that faith to have expression through baptism, church membership, prayer, Bible study, etc., constraining your life to the glory of God? God wills that your life be equalized in Him through the medium of the faith once delivered to the saints.

FOR THOUGHT: In what way may it be rightfully said that all men are created equal? What then is the great equalizer that must be applied to all men to be accepted by God? How is that equalizer applied to the individual? Is it applied to you?

THE I CAN SYNDROME

"I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." Phil. 4:13.

A syndrome is defined as a set of symptoms or a condition characterized by a set of symptoms working together by which it is identified, as the "not in my backyard" syndrome.

In today's world, it is easy to find a negative syndrome dominating the lives of God's people. It is the sense of overload, of burden that limits or negates altogether their pressing forward in the things that count in life, that which is of God and beneficial to self and to others. What I mean is this: when asked how one is doing or when asking for someone to actually do something, one is likely to hear, "I am doing all right under the circumstances," or "I would love to, but cannot under the circumstances."

Now why is it that most folks are always "under the circumstances?" Is this just an excuse, or do people really feel loaded down, depressed, unable to do what they should with any degree of joy? Doubtless, this is a condition that actually exists in the lives of some folks at times, but then they become comfortable in it, and it becomes a syndrome by which they are recognized.

The good news is that there is another, completely different syndrome that can characterize life. It is the "I can" syndrome. Folks in leadership capacity often look for someone to take responsibility for a task. They find, without exception, that if they really want to get something done, they should call on someone who is really busy. In him/her, they will find one who has learned to manage time and abilities; one who is characterized by the "I can" syndrome. Such persons live in the joy of accomplishment, on TOP of the circumstances instead of under them.

This is the syndrome that characterized the apostle, Paul. He, more than others, could have set forth reasons why he had enough burdens, and too many heartaches, but his was the joy of involvement, of accomplishment. He is a great example of what we all can be in Christ. We should all be busy doing what we can do for the cause of Christ, not under, but on top of, the circumstances. That is not dependence in self, but in Christ!

FOR THOUGHT: Do you know anyone who is most always under the circumstances? Think of someone you can identify as most always on top of the circumstances. What do you think makes the difference in these two types of people?

THE IMPORTANCE OF DETAILS

Educators know that higher intelligence surfaces in the recognition of details. While it is important to see the forest, it is of greater importance to see the trees that constitute it. When looking at a kindergarten stick drawing of a boy or girl, they are impressed if the hands contain five fingers because most kindergarten students might draw only two or three.

Indeed, details are important, and the lack of knowledge of them can be quite embarrassing at times. Here is a case in point.

Recently, President Obama of the United States attempted to justify his release and/or swaps of prisoners by referencing three former Presidents of the U.S. that did the same thing on their watch at the end of wars, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt. One might find it interesting to note that none of these Presidents were in office at the end of the wars of their time.

George Washington was not elected until six years after the end of the Revolutionary War. Abraham Lincoln was assassinated before the Civil War ended, and Franklin Roosevelt died before the end of WWII. In another interview, he said that George Washington drank beer in the White House when he was President. In fact, he never lived in the White House since it had not been built. Perhaps his Ivy League college is proud of him, but one would think his staff would clue him in on important points of American history which he obviously did not get in the schools of the Far East.

Similarly, Christians often display an obvious lack of detailed knowledge of God's Word when conversing with others. How embarrassing is it to hear someone say that Elijah was thrown into the lion's den instead of Daniel, or that the seed on stony ground failed after it rained forty days and nights, or that the rainbow is a sign of the resurrection. Doubtless, such bloopers are extreme, but there are so many others that are not, but just as wrong.

The Bible teaches us that we are ambassadors for Christ...not that we should be... but that we are! *"Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God."* 2 Corinthians 5:20. Let us all then work to be good ambassadors with a basic knowledge bank of the scriptures and an understanding of what that knowledge means.

FOR THOUGHT: A child's overlooking details is acceptable, but what about someone in the nation's highest office overlooking the important details of history?
How tragic would it be if the spiritual details of the Bible are overlooked or ignored?
Do you think men have the liberty to alter details of the Bible? Why?

THE IMPORTANCE OF KNOWLEDGE

"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge: because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee, that thou shalt be no priest to me: seeing thou has forgotten the law of thy God, I will also forget thy children." Hosea 4:6.

The message of God through the prophet Hosea to the ten tribes that made up the Northern Kingdom of Israel should have brought piercing alarm to them, but as is most often the case, they were so steeped in iniquity and selfishness, that it did not give them pause.

Accordingly, God sent judgment upon them in the form of the Assyrians who conquered them, inhabited their cities, dispersed some, and intermingled through marriage the others so that their identity became lost to the world to this day. Could we fast forward to today, and apply this message to the covenant people of God, the New Testament church? Think with me!

The New Testament church is the covenant embodiment of grace in men. It is what the New Testament is all about. However, modern times have brought the toughest temptations of the ages, that of abundant materialism, and the willingness of men to enslave themselves and their families in order to have its offerings. Couple that with a social religion whose tenets are foreign to the New Testament, and a false sense of security, spiritual lethargy, and slumber takes over. Knowledge is forgotten, if it was ever discovered, through the common, "I am O.K.; you are O.K." mindset. The present, degenerated condition of what used to be called the backslidden state, leaves the majority of church members grossly ignorant of the tenets of the faith, once delivered to the saints; and its grand legacy often counted as worthless as a result. In light of the plentiful copies of the plenary Word of God, collecting dust on the shelves of Christian homes, is it reasonable to expect a lesser or a harsher judgment than Hosea announced to Israel?

The actions of God's people today are not without consequence, even as those of Israel were not. Forget God, and He will forget you, insofar as any covenant blessing is concerned, and those are many and extremely rich! Then, what about the children, and the grandchildren? Some would hasten to say that a God of love would not do that. Well, He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. It has happened before, and it will happen again. God reacts to man as man reacts to God! How are you treating Him? What do you know of Him and His Word? Much that is so dear to you hangs in the balance . . . forever!

FOR THOUGHT: Do you believe modern Christians are more knowledgeable than those of generations gone by? Why?

If the ten tribes of Israel were destroyed for lack of knowledge, what amount of knowledge does the average churchgoer have today to prevent a similar fate?

Does God visit the sins of fathers on children of the third and fourth generations?

Is America blessed or cursed today by the actions of early colonists?

THE NATURAL BRANCHES TEACH A VALUABLE LESSON

The reinstitution and revival of the Jewish nation since 1948 fills the evangelical world with excitement, leading them to proclaim that God is mightily blessing Israel. There may be another viewpoint worth considering. Think with me for a moment.

The work of God with man involves a system of faith covenants which began in Abraham. It was passed on to Isaac, and Jacob, then an additional covenant was created for the Hebrew people on Mt. Sinai, a covenant of law that was destined to be fulfilled by the second Adam, who also ushered in the covenant of grace.

Officially, the people of the law covenant rejected Jesus with dire consequences. Jesus said in finality, *"Behold your house is left unto you desolate. . . Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord."* Matt. 23:38-39. Desolate! What a sense of isolation and abandonment that term portrays.

Reminiscing, my first trip to the Holy Land was filled with so much wonder, as well as many misgivings. While in Jericho, a couple of young ladies (schoolteachers) asked if there was room could they ride back to Jerusalem with us. They did. Engaging them in conversation, I stated, "I guess you will be going to the synagogue tomorrow." (It was a Friday afternoon). "WHAT?!" they replied in amazement. "No one does that anymore!" So, I subsequently learned how godless the people really were, and was shocked to learn that Tel Aviv is at least arguably the homosexual capital of the world.

Furthermore, the Yad Vashem Holocaust museum brings tears to the eyes, but there is a world of hurt still coming that will pale that horrible event. The problem: the natural branches are severed, but stop, think, learn!

The Lord's churches have been largely rocked to sleep in the opulence of materialism to the point that it appears to exist to please itself. Nothing must be done to rock their comfort zone, and false sense of spiritual superiority. Surely, it is past time that attention be returned to the book! The natural branches (the nation of Israel) have been severed, and the true Israel of God (the New Covenant Church) grafted in. So, is it time to revel in that grafted-in position? What does the scripture say? *"For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee."* Rom. 11:21.

Truly, the severed, natural branches still teach a valuable lesson to those who are able to discern it. Let the people of God dust off the Bible, return to reading and studying the Word. What has happened to Israel is not beyond the possibility, even the probability, of happening to a church immersed in the world of formal, but powerless, religious agendas.

FOR THOUGHT: What do the natural branches being severed (Rom. 11) mean to you?

Do you think God is working with national Israel in spiritual terms today? Why?

Do you see signs of modern churches becoming as Israel was in Jesus' day?

What do you think Jesus' pronouncement of "desolate" to Israel means?

THE ONE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF THREE FOR ME

In Romans 10:1-8 there are three distinct forms of righteousness mentioned. One is the righteousness of law; another is the righteousness of man; the third is the righteousness of the faith in and of Christ Jesus. Think about it!

“Righteousness” simply means rightwiseness; the state of being right. However, that which is right must be what is right in the sight of our Holy, Creator God. Israel had a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. Therefore, in their ignorance of true rightwiseness that is altogether acceptable to God, they engaged in the pursuit of their own rightwiseness; a rightwiseness that they themselves must build. Such is iniquity, and never acceptable to God. The rightwiseness of the law underscored the sinfulness of all men, and it led with unerring consistency to the rightwiseness of Christ Jesus, which lives in faith.

Accordingly, the rightwiseness of Christ Jesus is the rightwiseness of faith. *“Now faith is the substantiating of things hoped for; the evidence of things unseen,”* Heb. 11:1. It is no wonder then, that this faith is presented in hard evidence; identifiable and provable in terms of the Holy Bible. That is why it is presented as “the faith” in Romans 10:8, which is understood as the system of doctrines or teaching commonly called *“The faith once delivered to the saints.”* Jude 1:3. Thus did Paul say in the latter part of Rom. 10:8, *“...this is the declaration of the faith [system of doctrines] which we are proclaiming.”* [Lit. translation].

That the burden of the chapter deals with the salvation of the mind-life of the born-again ones is evident, for he goes on to say, *“If you should be avowing in your mouth the Lordship of Jesus, and you should be believing in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you shall be being saved.”* [Lit. translation].

The doctrine of immediate, spiritual salvation upon repentance from sin and receiving Christ Jesus as Savior is a most precious and cornerstone doctrine. However, the rightwise life God would have all His people to know and to live must go beyond the spiritual salvation experience to embrace the teachings of Holy Writ, Heb. 6:1-3. That is the faith of Christ Jesus, and it is precisely that which may produce salvation of the soul or mind-life of those who have been born from above. The rightwiseness of man, and the rightwiseness of the law are not to be desired, but the rightwiseness by the faith of Christ Jesus is to be highly prized.

FOR THOUGHT: Name the three forms of righteousness Paul mentions in Romans 10:1-8.

What is meant by the terms “the faith?”

What is a good, Bible definition of faith?

Does salvation of the spirit of man and salvation of the mind-life make sense to you?

Do you think lost people still engage in good, moral works in hopes of obtaining favor with God?

THE PLACE OF LAW AND GRACE

Oil and water do not mix. But they would mix before law and grace would do so. A question was posed about Exodus 23:3, 6, “*Neither shalt thou countenance a poor man in his cause,*” and “*Thou shalt not wrest the judgment of thy poor in his cause.*” Does this mean that poor people should be exempt from any law based on their socio-economic status?

It is my studied belief that Israel is here commanded to be “straight shooters” under the terms of the Mosaic Law. That is, the poor man was not to be excused simply because he was poor, and the judgment against him was definitely not to be skewed in his disfavor. Now consider the contextual meaning as well.

These verses are the initiation of Law to Israel, the covenant people of God. It was vitally important that they learn (and we, as well, from them) the difference between sin and righteousness, and just how completely righteous God is, and how completely sinful man is. This law then became our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, and His grace, Paul argues in Galatians 3:24-25.

However, the law and the prophets were, until John (the Baptist) Luke 16:16. Jesus said they must be fulfilled, Luke 24:44, and He did so according to Matthew 5:18; Col. 2:14-17. The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came to us by Christ Jesus, John 1:17. Grace does not mean that the law was not righteous, quite the contrary. Covenants may change, but principles do not.

Law is law! It is commandment plus penalty. If either is absent, law is not in play. It cannot be injected with anything else and still be law. But it is recognized that some cases tried by the medium of courts of law may either merit or demand mercy. But, when mercy is injected, it negates law and creates grace. Grace is what Jesus is all about. He as the Godman met each and every demand of Law. He fulfilled it to the very jot and tittle and offers to us, not the punishment of law which we deserve, (and by which God’s standard will always remain) but His own righteousness by grace through faith.

Moreover, just as law cannot be injected with anything else and remain law, so it is with grace. It is ludicrous to seek to maintain grace through law. This is the trouble the churches of Galatia got into, and which Paul addressed in his epistle by their name. After all, the law was not given for righteous people, but for sinners. By it they could understand their lost condition and their inability to do anything about it except through an extraordinary act of grace.

That mercy and grace should rule whenever possible among the affairs of men is underscored repeatedly in Jesus’ teachings, and especially in Matthew 18:21-30.

FOR THOUGHT: Why do you think law and grace do not mix?

What was the purpose of Old Testament Law?

What was the danger of men rendering judgment in olden times? In modern times? Do you think rich people may have an advantage at court over poor people?

THE POWER OF LIVING VICARIOUSLY

Curiosity may have killed the cat, but there would be little human progress without it. Curious minds are inquiring minds, and inquiring minds want to know. Accordingly, the shelves of bookstores and libraries across the nation abound with fiction and non-fiction, biographies, and references, books of most every sort. The pages are filled with well-arranged words, crafted to plot, explain, and record events that allow the reader to fit into the designed role of the protagonist, or the context of an historical event, or envision the process of construction or repair.

So, to identify as someone else for an adventure, exercising the senses of life in pre-arranged context is known as living vicariously. It is the power of books, videos, and good story tellers. Most folks really do enjoy living vicariously and will go to great lengths to do it for a little time. One will not interact long with friends before hearing of a really good book or exciting movie. I once knew a lady who loved to live vicariously so much that she had rooms of bookshelves crammed full of novels she had read. But aside from practical instructional manuals and historical records, those experiences last about as long as it takes to read the book or view the movie. It is human entertainment.

But there is another library of sixty-six books of important, non-fictional events ranging from creation, to murder, love, sensual promiscuity, global disaster, adventure, war, enslavement, salvation, covenants of God and man, grace, faith, hope for every person, and accurate information about exactly how the human future will come into eternal fixation. Unlike other types of books, this one contains no errors, no contradictions, and its words are accompanied with phenomenal power of the unseen world. In the words of the Creator, “. . . *the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit and they are life.*” John 6:63.

What was it like when God spoke the unseen into present creation, when he decided to destroy the world with a flood? What was it like when Abraham followed God into a strange land, when Jacob worked so many years for his wives, when he wrestled with an angel, when the Hebrews made their exodus from Egypt, when Daniel spent his life in Babylonian captivity, when the shepherds first heard the angelic announcement that God’s Son had been given to us? What was it like to stand on Golgotha and know that what you were seeing was done for you?

The library to which I refer is in your grasp; it is in your home. How much time you have spent living vicariously in it shows, because unlike others, it transforms the reader by renewing the mind.

FOR THOUGHT: Have you discovered the mentioned, wide range of subject matter in the Bible? What do you think about it? Why do you think these things are in the Bible? What does Jesus mean when he spoke the words in John 6:63? Since the Bible is God’s instructional manual for human life, and since you own a copy of it, what excuse may be offered for being ignorant of it?

THE SOUGHT, THE BOUGHT, AND THE TAUGHT

“How then can man be justified with God? or how can he be clean that is born of a woman?” Job 25:4.

These three things summarize all the goodness afforded sinful mankind, the love, the blood and the Word. Think with me about this.

It is unceasingly amazing that the Great, Holy, Almighty God, who made all things, and sustains the universe in His power, should love such depraved, sinful, creatures as human beings. But thank God, He does. He loves us with a love so profound and intense that it is not comprehensible to our finite mind. Perhaps the greatest expression of that love is penned in the immortal words of John 3:16, *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”* It was purely the love of God that sought us in our altogether sinful state. There is more.

But seeking alone is ineffective. There was a price to pay for the never-dying souls of men—a price that no offspring of Adam could possibly pay. Yet, it must be paid by man. It was man who admitted sin into the human race; therefore, it must be by man that sin is overcome, and eternal life put in its place, I Cor. 15:21. To this end the Great Creator became a man, born of a virgin—sinless and holy to fulfill the law, and paid the awful price for sin on the cruel cross. Make no mistake about it, it was the holy blood of Jesus, the Son of God, that paid the price for our condemned souls. “What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. Oh, precious is the flow that makes me white as snow. No other fount I know, nothing but the blood of Jesus.” Consider also that it doesn’t stop here.

Additionally, we are saved to serve, *“We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works which God before ordained that we should walk in them.”* Eph. 2:10. Human lives could never be justified by the deeds of the law. However, by receiving and living in the “faith once delivered to the saints,” the life of one may be justified before God, even as Abraham our father was justified by his expression of faith, argues James in his book. So, what should we believe? How shall we live? What shall we teach? What is our hope? All of these questions and many, many more are satisfied by the plenary, infallible, written word of God. These are instructions that must not be ignored but learned and employed.

As the holiday season brings forth increased thoughts of God and our relationship with Him, we are humbled, even overwhelmed, by the abundant and consistent blessings bestowed upon us. Making a list would consume much time. That thought is so wonderful! However, much is said when in studied thought, one gives thanks to God for the Love that sought us, the Blood that bought us, and the Word that taught us. Therein are we justified before God in our living because God sees us through the righteousness of His only begotten Son.

FOR THOUGHT: Does “justified” mean to be innocent or to be declared righteous?

What are the three important terms summarizing goodness in this article?

Think about how these three things apply to you, or should be applied to you?

THE VALUE OF A WEDDING GARMENT

It is marked, common propensity in men to err. If a passage of scripture is not easily understood, it may be passed over as relatively unimportant. It will not be studied by the majority, nor will it be seriously entertained widely as explained by others. Like children who refuse nourishment and growth in favor of their status quo, folks tend to revert to a base, correct theology that is made to be incorrect through neglect of the next step. Think with me!

Matthew 22: 1-14 is as much scripture as John 3:16. It is holy, and it has a definite meaning that is important to understand. It is the story of a marriage feast prepared by a certain king for his son. Servants were sent out with invitations, but excuses were made by most all. Moreover, the servants were treated spitefully by those rejecting the invitation. Then the king sent other servants to invite whomever they found so that the feast was furnished with guests. It was then that the king saw one among the guests without a wedding garment. He was evicted. **Bottom line:** many are called but few are chosen. **Beginning line:** this is like the kingdom of heaven. **These two lines make the story clear as a bell.**

It is the kingdom under consideration. The kingdom of heaven is defined as the righteous work of God being carried on by righteous men. Jesus repeatedly warned the Jews that the kingdom was to be taken from them and given to another. And so, it came to pass as the old covenant was fulfilled to the jot and tittle on the cross, and the New Covenant was purchased with His blood. The house of the Jewish people was left unto them desolate.

Of course, many of the Jews still claim to be the covenant people of God as do a fairly large segment of apostate churches. But the time is coming when the marriage supper of the Lamb will occur, and some who think they have a place in it will be rejected. Again, this is not a salvation story, but a kingdom story. It teaches that there is much to be responsible for after initial salvation and church membership. Many are called to be a part of this wonderful kingdom, but few are chosen. What are the criteria for being chosen? It is simply a positive response to the call. Submissive discipleship bears tremendous reward. The wedding garment of obedience in righteous works (of God's approval) is of immense value!

FOR THOUGHT: May one be saved (born from above) and denied a place of rulership with Jesus in the next phase of the kingdom of heaven when He returns?
If the wedding garment represents acceptable, righteous works, what will happen if one is devoid of such, or if all he has done has been outside Bible sanction?
What do you think Matthew 22:1-14 means?

THE VALUE OF EDUCATION

From earliest times, opportunities and tremendous blessings from the Creator were abundant for those prepared to receive them. Recipients' key requisites most often were education and faith in His word and works. It remains that way! Think with me a moment.

Antediluvian world folks, far afield from the primitive imagination of modern man, show excellence in education. Adam must have been created with the equivalent of a PhD since he gave names to everything in creation, Gen. 2:19. Jabal excelled in animal husbandry. Jubal in music, especially in harp and organ. Tubalcain was a master artificer in brass and iron. Nimrod built a city. On and on it goes. Then God called upon Noah to build an ark to the saving of air-breathing life. It was approximately 450 by 45 by 30 in foot dimensions. Now just what dumb bunny was able to do that? Noah was a righteous man, but he was also an educated man, and prepared for the job.

Looking at other instances, Moses stands out as exemplary in educational readiness. He had the best Egypt could provide plus 40 years of personally examining the terrain of Sinai. David was a mighty warrior, but also a master of strategy, faith, and music. Notice also that Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego) were especially selected by King Nebuchadnezzar, not because he knew them, but because they fit his criteria of service, to wit: *“. . . no blemish, but well favored, and skillful in all wisdom, and cunning in knowledge, and understanding science, and such as had ability in them to stand in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the learning and the tongue of the Chaldeans.”* Daniel 1:4. They were ready in both spiritual and material education to seize upon opportunities to serve both God and man.

Finally, in the important initial evangelism of the first century world, God chose Saul of Tarsus, a Hebrew of Hebrews, more zealous in his faith than all his brethren, and who could not only evangelize with the New Testament doctrines after God got through teaching him, but who could, by his excellent education in the tradition of his fathers, persuade thousands of Jews and Gentiles alike to embrace New Testament faith. Men should excel in something, faith notwithstanding and underscored, and then use that excellence to help others, as God provides opportunities, which He most certainly will do.

Through brick-and-mortar institutions and online educational offerings, the present generation has more information and outreach ability than all the past generations had in all their collective forms. Still, the propensity to submit to the lure of inertia manages to hinder both individual and church progress. Perhaps we all would do well to hear God's still small voice to Elijah saying, "What are you doing here?"

FOR THOUGHT: Do you see a pattern of educational excellence in men God has used? Should education steer spiritual understanding in men or vice-versa? If you agree that to whom much is given, much is required, do you also agree that more is required of modern disciples because of the advanced opportunities of life?

THE VALUE OF "TODAY!"

O.K. You wanted it. You've got it! Just think! Jeremiah recorded in Lamentations 3:22-24, *"It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him."* So, it is a new day. The first day of the rest of your life. A new crossroads, with you having the opportunity to make really right, lasting choices of goodness. It might be illustrated by the little guy who was so happy with his birthday party that he wished he could have a birthday every day. Well, you may!

No, I have not lost it! The vacation did not make me crazy, but have you ever said or heard someone say, "If only I had the chance to do it all over again?"

Well, today is the first day of the rest of your life, so, HAPPY BIRTHDAY!! The Bible reference to this present age of grace is called TODAY! One day, TODAY will close, and death will close it prematurely for millions. Today is precious! It is your day! So, today you begin anew, all over again! Whatever you wanted life to be for you within the will of God, let it begin today! In a manner of speaking, you really can do it all over again! But will things change? Will they be different, or will they be the same piling up of more regret?

Remember, God is leading, but He is not forcing! A commitment on your part is necessary to put Him first in regular church attendance, Bible reading, prayer, and in witnessing, while reaching out to help others. In other words, in the commitment of true perpetual worship comes the enabling power of God through the Holy Spirit to weave a fabric of life that is truly different. What then is needed on your part? It is an unreserved commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ, not only as your Savior, but as your Lord. Do it!!!!

FOR THOUGHT: Have you ever really wanted to start all over again?

Since Jesus bids "whosoever" to come to Him and drink freely of the water of life, do you believe this offer extends to you?

Do you think Satanic influence plays a part in people procrastinating in commitment to Christ?

Think of the things that are interfering with your commitment. Are they worth it? What will be their value in one hundred years? In eternity?

Do you have any reason to believe that you will definitely be alive here on earth tomorrow?

THE VERBALLY INSPIRED, PLENARY BIBLE

"All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." 2 Timothy 3:16.

Some Bibles have an initial dedicatory page. Others may have simple statements about the contents of the book, indicating it is the verbally inspired, plenary word of God. Just what does this mean? Think with me for a minute!

The Holy Bible is the Word of God to mankind. It illuminates us all about the common and condemning problem of sin, how to be saved, and more than ninety percent of it tells us how to live after the "born from above" spiritual experience. But how did it come to us? God chose to use human instrumentality to deliver His inerrant, eternal Word. To that end, He inspired some 40 writers living in different countries, different cultures, and different languages to write sixty-six books over a 1500-year period of time. All of this without contradiction!

"Verbal" means that writers were allowed to write in their own style and language. "Inspired" means the Holy Spirit superintended the writing so that each word was exactly the right word. "Plenary" simply means full or complete. Thus does the Bible embody the faith once (for all time) given to the saints, Jude 3.

Once the original writings (autographs) were completed, copies were diligently written by professional scribes for distribution and preservation. Many of those most ancient manuscripts remain with us to this day and are the basis of printed Bibles, particularly some thirty such manuscripts collectively known as the "Textus Receptus," or "Received Text", from which the King James and some other versions are translated.

Thus, the verbally inspired, plenary Bible is the perfect law of liberty, of which James wrote. James 1:25. It is that perfect thing, which was to come in Paul's day, I Cor 13:10, which would replace the temporary grace gifts of the apostolic age. It is the standard and criteria by which the life of the saved will be made manifest at the Judgment Seat of Christ, and unrepentant sinners at the Great White Throne Judgment, as the books are opened. John 12:48.

Ironically, there is considerable squabbling in these last days as to which version of the Bible one should study. In the explosion of translations over the last 100 years, it is true that some are more true to the ancient manuscripts, but saddest of all is a statement overheard not long ago, "It really does not matter what version of the Bible one does NOT read!"

FOR THOUGHT: Some Bibles are translations, others are paraphrases. What is the difference?

Do you believe the "all scripture" of 2 Timothy 3:16 is the inspired Word of God?

What does "Textus Receptus" mean? What constitutes it?

THE WOE THAT SHOUTS, “WHOA!”

It has been said of some folks, “They are so heavenly minded that they are of little earthly good!” Truly, the dimension of divinely approved discipleship goes beyond rules. It is deeper, higher, broader than many suppose. However, it is just too easy to get caught up in a set of religious rules that invariably leads one down the path of legalism. It had happened to a lot of folks in Jesus’ day, and it still does. Indeed, there are many right things that modern disciples of God do, but a spiritual relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ cannot be acceptably reduced to a set of rules. It goes deeper, much deeper.

Some of the most scathing denunciations from the Master fell on the religious folks who had hewn out a traditional path to the exclusion of many, vitally important tenets of faith and actions. The Pharisees had managed to skirt responsibility for their aged parents, as taught under the law of Moses, by claiming all they had was “corbin,” (dedicated to God). Moreover, in full confrontation to the legal, self-righteous leaders of His day, Jesus said, *“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.”* Matt. 23:23. It was not so much a matter of their doing wrong, as it was failure to do what was right, to complete the practice of discipleship in a godly way.

The danger of this being a repetitious cycle is ever present. True Christianity certainly does have specific tenets of doctrine, but the complements of morals, compassion, love, and genuinely caring for others, make up a mode of life prompted by the Holy Spirit; one that comes from the very heart of spiritual people. It is deep, it is wide, it is high, it is often spontaneous and instant. It is evidence of the residence of that New Commandment Jesus gave, that we love one another, even as He loves us.

We do well to maintain a close one-on-one relationship with Jesus, which will enable us to walk in the Spirit, as well as the letter of His Word. Jesus pronounced woe on some legalistically religious folks. It was a woe that shouted “Whoa!” Perhaps we all should hear that more often!

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think there is a danger of spirituality being substituted by legalism? Should trusted spiritual leaders be accepted at face value or should their teaching be plainly supported by what the Bible says?

Do you agree that while true churches and ministers are important, the most important thing for every individual is an on-going, personal relationship with God, and the churches and ministers are for the support of such?

THE WORLD OF THEOLOGICAL MAYHEM

"Wherefore be ye not unwise but understanding what the will of the Lord is." Ephesians 5:17.

Theology is built in the human mind and heart one word at a time. It is imperative that each term be thoroughly understood and used in appropriate expression. Satan's trick to blind folks is not to change terminology, but to change the definition of them. The result is religious mayhem in what is supposed to represent Jesus and His teachings in Holy Writ. See then how this affects ecclesiology, or the understanding of "church."

"Church" is the ambiguous, English word used to translate the Greek word, "ecclesia." That term is a composite of "ek" (out) plus "kaleo," (to call); hence, a called-out assembly. It is not exclusively a Bible term but was used in early Greek to designate town councils, etc. when they were in session. It was always a local, visible assembly of specific purpose. Jesus used this term to designate his followers. It was understood by this definition for many centuries.

With the division of churches over the encroachment of ministerial hierarchies, growing doctrinal differences, and the acceptance of the Roman government by some to be the state religion, the allegiance to Jesus was escalated away, in favor of the state of Rome. This gave rise to what is known among them as the universal, visible church. They solidified that status with the installation of a "pope" around 606 A.D. So, a new understanding of "church" came into existence.

Next, the Protestant Reformation found the reformers and their followers in dire straits. They understood the need for church authority to administer the sacraments, and they recognized that they were without it. They could not bring themselves to return to the Roman pope, and they disdained the Anabaptists. So, they invented a way for themselves. It was here that the idea of the universal, **invisible** church was first conceived. It postulates that one is admitted to the universal, invisible church in the initial salvation experience, regardless of baptism or admission to a physical assembly. For nearly 500 years their scholars have written theological matters from this viewpoint, and it has impacted Baptists on a large scale. Hence, yet another heretical definition is placed on the word "church."

Opposing definitions of terms and opposing doctrinal beliefs have done much to wreak theological havoc in the modern world. But it underscores individual responsibility to understand from the Word, and to incorporate that into one's belief system. Soon, full accounting of these things must be given to the Master whose truth will forever remain unbending.

FOR THOUGHT: Research the origin of the English word "church." What does it mean? If the Greek term of the New Testament means a visible, assembly called out or together for a specific purpose, do men have the authorized liberty to change it to mean something else? Do you understand that Satanic influence in religious men would work tactfully to ultimately destroy what Jesus personally initiated in His ministry? Do you agree that men may be sincere, but at the same time, be sincerely wrong?

THINGS ARE NOT ALWAYS AS ONE MAY THINK!

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek." Romans 1:16.

A number of years ago, a church member who worked for a large company was given a trip for two to Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. His wife was deathly afraid of air travel and would not go under any circumstances. So, he gave the trip to his pastor and wife. We were thrilled to have this special five-day treat. Our names were added to the roster of other business owners and employees who were to make the trip. My name was simply listed as William Dillard. That created no small stir, of which I was totally unaware.

As Laura and I boarded the plane to begin the trip, we were aware of intense gazing from several others. One was heard to remark, "Is that really William Dillard, and if so, why is he wearing a belt buckle that says Jerusalem?" We caught on. They were expecting the owner of the Dillard Corporation whose name was William to be the boarding passenger, not a Baptist preacher.

After a few laughs, and some others regaining their composure to cover their embarrassment, we capitalized on the mistaken identity as a talking point. It provided a springboard into other interesting areas of life, and the uplifting of the Lord Jesus as well. The trip was most enjoyable. The hotel featured very nice rooms, unique swimming pools, and a huge open breezeway entry. The beaches were blackened sand from volcano activity long, long ago. The food, entertainment and relaxation were marvelous. In the end, the fairly large group was happy to have a Baptist preacher and his wife and told us so. We carried a couple of hundred New Testaments with us and were delighted in presenting them to business owners in the tourist city. Many of them were happy to receive them and complimented us, stating no one who had ever visited their store had given such a nice gift. We hope many of them trusted the Lord as a result.

Truly, things are not always as they may appear to be and that can be very disappointing. Solomon said, *"There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death."* Proverbs 14:12. But one is never disappointed in the Lord Jesus Christ and the tremendous blessings of life that come from His hand.

FOR THOUGHT: If salvation is in Christ alone, why do so many try to add works to it? Do you think mistaken identities on earth may indicate possible mistakes about eternal verities? Think about a few times that you have been honestly mistaken about anything.

THINK! IT'S A GOOD TRICK IF YOU CAN DO IT!

"And she went and did according to the saying of Elijah: and she, and he, and her house, did eat many days. And the barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord, which he spake by Elijah." I Kings 17: 15-16.

From the pages of antiquity comes an unusual, arresting story that the Lord Jesus would use hundreds of years later. It would offer the Pharisees, and all future generations, an opportunity to rethink their spiritual position.

Now, as then, there are those who feel that they have God franchised; that if He does anything at all, He will either consult with, or work through them. Not so! This writer has profound respect for the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, but it remains possible for a church to become just as the ancient Pharisees were in this regard.

So, jumping in thought from the ancient days to the ministry of Jesus, we hear him saying in confrontation with the Pharisees, *"But I tell you of a truth, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elias, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when great famine was throughout all the land; But unto none of them was Elias sent, save unto Sarepta, a city of Sidon, unto a woman that was a widow."* 4:25-26. This so infuriated the good folks in the synagogue at Nazareth that they sought to cast Jesus off a mountain. (What kind of righteousness is that?)

Things have not changed over the years. People are thinking, believing, doing wrong, and when confronted with truth, they have two options, repent of it and change, or retain error, and become angry. Blessed are those who do the former.

But the ancient Pharisees were so much like many modern religionists. They were so steeped in traditions, many of which supplanted the Word of God, that they became blinded to opportunities around them, and the magnificent, awesome possibilities afforded to those who simply trust, and do so with childlike faith. We should pray that our minds and hearts be more as parachutes and less like concrete.

So, just why did God bypass His people of covenant in the days of Elias to bring such a blessing and marvelous story into the Word using someone estranged from that covenant? It was for the very purpose that Jesus used it hundreds of years later. Also, He doubtlessly knew this common, human failure was not restricted to the Jews, but would afflict His people down through the centuries. By it, a wonderful goad was created for His people of all time.

Sometimes, great blessings in harmony with the Word, lie just outside the box of long held traditions. Then, let no power succeed in leaving one fearful or derelict to explore the principles of the eternal Word. THINK!

FOR THOUGHT: What is the problem with folks thinking they have a franchise on God?

Does a covenant with God equal a franchise? Why? Why not?

Are there any constraints to be observed in thinking outside the box about the Word?

Do you think the widow in this story was a woman of faith to share the last bit of food she and her son had to keep them alive with a stranger purporting to be a prophet of God?

THOU SHALT NOT SEETHE A KID IN HIS MOTHER'S MILK

This commandment is repeated in Exodus 23:19, and in 34:26. In each instance it is connected with the law of first fruits, the bounty of harvest, and how to properly acknowledge God as the One Who provides prosperity and health. What does it mean? Think with me!

Although this simple, but strong, command may seem somewhat strange to modern ears, it made important sense in the context of its days. The Hebrews had learned much in the pagan world of their environment, even much that they must unlearn. It was an apparent custom of many religious, superstitious nations to boil a very young goat or lamb in its mother's milk as a sacrificial offering to the gods of harvest. The kid was the product of life and the milk the sustenance of life. They would sprinkle this life-soup around their fruit trees and fields, believing this would be accepted by idols of their imagination, and their crops made to be bountiful next season.

God demanded the first fruits of harvest, but He also demanded to be recognized and worshipped as the Living God Who blessed and prospered His people. They were not to engage in heathen practices, and particularly one so cruel as to boil a newborn in the life-giving milk of its mother. The Living God of love and compassion toward His people would suffer the death of animals only under specific conditions, mostly for food, for sacrifices depicting the awfulness of sin, and depicting the hideous sacrifice it would require of the Sinless Son of God to expunge those sins from the repentant.

Heathen practices remain in our modern world. Men think to gain the favor of God through personal sacrifices, good works, rituals, etc., etc. These are nothing short of mockery and cruelty to the blessedness of the once-for-all sacrifice of the Lamb of God. What then does God require of every member of the condemned human race? Not to trust in or practice silly, cruel, vain things, but to look to God's sacrifice and *"believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved and thy house."* Acts 16:31.

FOR THOUGHT: The pagan practice of worshipping fertility led to rituals strictly forbidden by the Lord to His people. How did the idea of fertility and life play into a kid being seethed in its mother's milk?

Name three reasons why the Bible sanctioned the taking of animal life.

After considering the information in this article, does the command in Exodus 23:19 make sense?

TILL THE UNITY OF THE FAITH

When Jesus ascended into heaven, He, among other things, gave gifts unto men. What were those gifts, and why did He give them? Ephesians 4:11 names the gifts as apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers, or what appears to be teaching pastors. These were not callings in the strictest sense, but outright, direct gifts. These people were instantly empowered with knowledge and ability to operate in these fields of endeavor.

The question then arises as to why Jesus did this? Again, Ephesians 4:12 plainly states these gifts were given specifically for the perfecting (completeness of knowledge and understanding) of the saints, the work of the ministry, and for the edifying of the body of Christ (His church).

The duration of these gifts was to be until the achievement of unity of understanding the faith once delivered to the saints; unity of knowledge of Jesus; to the status of a perfect (complete, whole, not fragmented) man, even to the measure of the stature of the fullness of the anointed. Ephesians 4:13, Eph. 1:23.

Stated reasons for the need to achieve these goals quickly are that the church should no longer be spiritual children, subject to the wiles of the devil, and cunning craftiness of evil men, but to speak the truth in love, growing up into Him (Christ) in all things. Eph. 4:14.

Such gifts continued throughout the apostolic age but ceased with the canonization of the scriptures. Today, God still blesses His churches with teaching pastors and evangelists. There are no prophets, and there are no apostles. This fact underscores the cessation of these things as gifts. Although, the work of bringing God's people to a state of spiritual maturity continues with every generation, the unity of the faith was achieved a very long time ago. By this the Lord's churches have been enabled to survive the onslaughts of the age and still do good business for Him. Moreover, pastoral and evangelistic desires in men and their positive responses continue, but such are not gifts. They are callings for which those called must spend much time in preparation. This enables them to walk worthy of the vocation with which they are called. I understand this to be true to the scriptures.

FOR THOUGHT: Why do you think the faith of Christ is referenced in Jude 3 as once delivered to the saints? Does that indicate completion of the faith?

Since Baptist churches have been settled since apostolic times on the core doctrines of the Bible, is that not a fulfillment of Ephesians 4:12?

If these things are not so, think about and discuss what the perfecting of the saints may mean.

TO WHAT (WHERE) WE ARE COME

“But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel.” Heb 12:22-24.

These few lines center on the contrast between the law and the church, as expressed by “church of the firstborn.” The Old Testament world of shadows and symbols and the New Testament world of realities match in a most thrilling way.

It begins in the Hebrews’ exodus from Egypt. God purchased to Himself the firstborn by the blood of the Passover Lamb. This act emphatically proclaimed to the Hebrews that the first fruits of man, beast, the field, etc. belonged to Him, and such must be yielded to Him or redeemed with fair price. A census was taken, and the tribe of Levi almost perfectly matched in number the total of firstborn saved from death by the blood, whereupon God traded the firstborn back to the Hebrews for the entire tribe of Levi, who would produce the priests and minister about holy things. It is important to connect the dots here. The Old Testament priests became representative of the firstborn ones whom God redeemed for Himself and symbolic of the church to which we have come.

The Levitical priesthood was destined to cease, however. Another high priest, after the order of Melchizedek, would serve the covenant people of God without end. This priest, of course, is Jesus, who is THE FIRST BORN from the dead among many brethren.

When the new high priest fulfilled every jot and title of the Mosaic Law, He redeemed his people of covenant out from under the old and into the new, the expression of the New Covenant among men is the New Testament church, the pillar and ground of the truth, purchased with His own blood. Soon after Pentecost, gentiles were added. The church grew by leaps and bounds under its missionary efforts. People of this New Covenant are called the “Israel of God,” Gal. 6:16. Moreover, Peter calls them “a royal priesthood.” I Peter 2:9.

Consequently, the emphasis is that we are no longer under the law. We have not come to Mt. Sinai, but to Mt. Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem . . . to the church of the firstborn . . . while we have this blessed status and enjoy the understanding and spiritual maturity it affords us, there is much greater personal responsibility regarding submission to the instructions of Christ Jesus, our eternal high priest. We must not turn away from Him who has spoken to us. We must learn to worship and serve God acceptably. While it is sweet to enjoy our relationship with Him as our Loving Heavenly Father, we must hear the other verses as well, and know that our God is indeed a consuming fire.

The church of the firstborn! A lofty position, place, covenant, to which we have been elevated in Christ Jesus.

FOR THOUGHT: What is the contrast under consideration in Hebrews 12:22-24?

Who, and what, was under a death sentence in Egypt if the Passover blood was not applied?

How does the ancient order of the Aaronic priesthood extend to us today?

Who is our eternal high priest?

If it was not safe to ignore instructions about the Passover blood, how is it not safe to ignore the instructions of our high priest?

UNCERTAINTY IN WITNESSING ELIMINATED

Many Christians fail to spread the joy of their faith due to uncertainty about their ability to do so effectively. That can, and should be, eliminated. Here are some helpful suggestions to make that a reality. Think with me!

First, get approved! 2 Timothy 2:15 emphasizes the need to study in order to be approved of God as a workman who is skillful in rightly dividing the Word of truth. Second, pray about it. Ask God to lead you into the life of someone who is ready to hear you. Those who ask are those who receive. Third, be forceful and sure in relating the scriptures, but do not be the proverbial “bull in a china shop!” Let any offense be the offense of the Cross!

Through it all, let love reign. People easily sense if someone genuinely cares about them, or if they are out on a “sales” mission. Leave church out of it, initially. Folks do not say it, but they want to know if you are interested in them or if you have an ulterior motive of selling church membership. Most of all, do it again and again, regardless of any one specific outcome. There is nothing like experience, even unpleasant ones, to prepare the Christian worker to do a better job. Who has not had an occasional door-slamming shut out? Certainly, Jesus did... often.

E. W. Pletcher, in Oklahoma, sometimes lectured to the ministerial students in Bible college. He had become fairly wealthy, beginning as a door-to-door salesman of memberships in an auto club, and parlaying his earnings into real estate. His testimony is that he rejoiced every time a door was slammed in his face. Instead of walking away dejected and sad, he whistled a tune because he had already figured it out, he would make one sale for every seven homes visited. A door slammer simply meant he now had only six more homes to visit to make a sale. What a positive attitude! It worked for him. In like manner, the Christian who labors and prays to win souls will find sweet success, but most often not in the first trial of witnessing. Perhaps it will not be found in the second or third, but it will be found! The Bible promise is wonderfully stated in Psalm 126:6, *“He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.”*

If the conditions of this verse of scripture are met, the harvest it promises will indeed be sure! Moreover, in the process, uncertainty in witnessing will be eliminated.

FOR THOUGHT: What do you think to be the chief hindrance to personal witnessing? Do you believe complete, expert knowledge of the Bible give immediate boldness to witness? If experience plays a major role in delivering a good witness, will it be built upon bad as well as good witness sessions? Think about positive attitude alone, then think about positive attitude backed by personal prayer.

UNDERSTANDING KNOWLEDGE

“Understanding!” What a beautiful word with a beautiful meaning. The first usage of the word does not by any means indicate the first time anyone had it, but it is interesting that it is first found in Exodus 21:3, *“And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, see, I have called by name Bezaleel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah: and I have filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship.”* The three intellectual properties are mentioned in the same verse, wisdom, understanding, and knowledge. Moreover, the same short verse underscores the source of such desired intellectual properties, the Spirit of God!

Doubtless, one who is wise will have acquired much knowledge and understand what he knows. However, the case with many is that they may have acquired much knowledge, but do not understand or fully comprehend the ramifications of what they know, vastly limiting, if not negating, wisdom. Paul mentioned this about some people in his writings to Timothy I Tim. 1:7, *“Desiring to be teachers of the law; understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm.”* Therefore, a considerable amount of Holy Writ is designed to address that problem.

A few verses are herewith referenced to this point, of how understanding is acquired. Witness Proverbs 15:32, *“He that refuseth instruction despiseth his own soul: but he that heareth reproof getteth understanding.”* *“Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore, get wisdom: and with all thy getting, get understanding.”* Prov. 4:7. Again, how is this acquired? *“Through thy precepts I get understanding...”* Psalm 119:104.

Paul admonished the church at Ephesus, *“Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is.”* Eph. 5:17. He prayed for the church at Colosse that they might *“. . . be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding.”* Col. 1:9.

So, the point is made repeatedly. Understanding is predicated on knowledge, and it is the pillar of wisdom. All three of these things are given of God to those who seek Him and allow the precious Word to be transferred from the written page to the mind and heart. James put it this way, *“If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.”* James 1:5.

FOR THOUGHT: How and where may one acquire knowledge, understanding, and wisdom? How do you perceive the interaction of knowledge, understanding and wisdom? Do you think the intellectual requisite mentioned in this article are reserved for the aged disciples? Why?

UNDERSTANDING LEADERSHIP

“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.” Acts 20:28.

“What the world needs is fewer chiefs, and a lot more Indians.” This, and similar statements often heard in politics and businesses, also applies to churches. The connotation of the statement indicates that a lot of chiefs, regardless of the environment, have created inept, bad, or unknowledgeable leadership. “Would be” chiefs do well to work at becoming good followers rather than the type of leader looked upon as inept.

There is often a heavy responsibility in leadership. Unwise people often look at the few perks or the perceived popularity of leadership, and aspire to that position, not understanding the awesome responsibility of knowledge, skill, and wisdom involved behind the scenes. This is especially true of ministry. Many seminary students wash out after the first year (if not sooner) as they come face to face with the austere lifestyle, demands of various, necessary disciplines, and the mundane duties often involved, (where did the glory go?) .

Often, leadership involves more encouragement to others than telling them what to do. Let this idea be illustrated by a high school football team and a young man named Mike, who was mentally challenged, but desperately wanted to be a part of it. Though he made many requests to be sent in to play they were all denied. Still, he hung on. One time the team was being beaten so badly, the coach thought it would make no difference anyway, so he sent him in. As the team huddled, the young man looked at the large linemen and said, “Fellows, if I had your size and strength, I would cream that team. You guys can do it, I know you, and I know you can!” He said to the receivers, “I know how fast you can run. You can outrun me any day, and I know you can outrun those defenders.” He said to the quarterback, “You are the best passer on the field. You can hit your receivers. I know you can. I have watched you. If I were as good as you, we would turn this game around.” His words built a fire in the team. They not only began to score they actually won the game. As the coach asked various team members what happened, they all replied, “It was Mike! He is an inspiration and a leader!”

Great leaders have succeeded in their role by going beyond the essential field of knowledge. Their inspiration and personal encouragement have often made the difference between success and failure.

The good news is we may all be successful leaders in the Lord’s work by being good followers of God’s directive and encouraging Word. It is not so much “follow me” as it is “follow me as I follow the Lord.” This was Paul’s appeal, and he, by the grace of God, made that “followership” become great leadership. Following his example makes all of us Indians to become bona fide chiefs!

FOR THOUGHT: How important do you think it is to notice the strong points of others and to encourage them?

Do you think one may be a good leader who cannot be a good follower? Why?

What do you want to see most in a spiritual leader? Why?

UNDERSTANDING “SERVE”

No language on earth other than English provides such multiple uses of the same terms to mean so many different things . A number of illustrations could be easily cited, but the focus of this article is on the term “serve.” Please think with me for a moment as the term relates to human relationship with the Creator.

In the ancient Hebrew language, the term most used is “Abad.” It first appears in Genesis 15:13, as God told Abraham that his posterity would sojourn in a strange land and serve them. Later, God used this term when telling Moses that he was to bring the Hebrews out of Egypt to this mountain where they would serve Him. This Hebrew word “serve” (Abad) is used some 290 times in the Old Testament and 227 of those times it is translated “serve.” Other translations include “labor,” “work,” “do,” etc., as contextual environment would seem to dictate.

In the New Testament Greek, the term is “Latreuo.” Jesus used this term in Matthew 4:10 while rebuking the devil and affirming that it is written that one is to serve God only. The basic meaning of this Greek term in secular thought references one who is hired. The indication is a contractual agreement in which the one hired carries out the expressed will of the employer. In the context of religious service, it means to worship, perform such prescribed services, rituals, duties, gifts, etc.as divinely given, and that in subjugated obedience.

So how do these definitions of ancient terms play out in modern mindsets? Often, “serve God” is used to identify actions actually contrary to the scriptures. It is heard that one serves God even though the service alluded to is participating in heretical religious ceremonies, and sometimes teaching things easily shown to be blatantly unscriptural. Perhaps closer to home, people actually claim to serve God through their own conjured ideas of what they consider “nice.” If I do what I consider to be nice things for my neighbor who has not asked me to do so, then claim that I am serving him, the reality is that I am serving myself in hopes my neighbor will acknowledge an assessment of my actions that matches my own. So, who is in control here, my neighbor or myself? In Bible terms, that is called iniquity. People are not big enough to sit in God’s chair, so they should abandon the notion in favor of seeking to understand God’s instruction and praying for grace to carry them out. In beliefs and in actions, God’s people are to worship Him exclusively as He expressly desires and accepts such acts of worship. So, be certain that your service is not man’s way, but God’s way. This means the Bible must be accepted as the final authority in doctrine and practice, which it will be eternally.

FOR THOUGHT: May beliefs and activities not sanctioned by the Bible count as a service to God?

Why do men’s idea of service to God and God’s Word often conflict?

On what basis may one think that God will accept unauthorized activity as service to Him?

Why do well-meaning people take unwarranted liberties in “service to God?”

UNEQUALLY YOKED A NO—NO!

In the Old Testament Law, a number of commandments were written that cause modern men to scratch their head. However, they make perfect sense when considering that those things were types and shadows of the will of God for His people in New Testament times. Consider with me one such instance.

Deuteronomy 22:10 commands, *“Thou shalt not plow with an ox and an ass together.”* This is not an uncommon occurrence in third world countries presently. Does God pity the ox or ass for enduring unequal yokefellow or is it said for our sakes. Perhaps a better understanding of it is revealed in specific New Testament passages such as 2 Corinthians 6:14, “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: . . .” This is usually taught to mean that believers should not be married to unbelievers (which is a good thing) but doubtless greater applications are intended, as is clarified in 1 Cor. 7:12-13. The marriage yoke should not be broken if all else is compatible.

What is specifically meant is written in terms that need not be misunderstood. The context of the verse is a message to the church of the Living God at Corinth. It is to be interpreted in that specific context. Believers in the faith once delivered to the saints are not to be yoked together with those who not only fail to believe said faith, but vehemently reject many of the tenets of it. In short, true New Testament churches should not be co-laborers with those of unlike faith, for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness or what communion does light have with darkness? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? (2 Cor. 6:14-16 paraphrased.)

Baptist churches are NOT Protestant churches. They have never been associated with Rome, nor will they ever be. But they can go astray, as did the small group of them that created the Roman Catholic church, by preferring to be married to the Roman Empire than to be separated to the Lord Jesus Christ.

True churches stand or fall in relationship to their creator and founder by how they embrace or lay aside the tenets of the faith once delivered to the saints. One of the quickest ways to fall is to esteem that faith of little value or as see it as a roadblock to progress with other religious organizations in the community which are diverse to them.

Returning to 2 Cor. 6, the conclusion is inescapable. God says, *“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.”* May two walk together in disagreement? To disregard God’s Word for the fellowship of others who disregard it, is to fly in the face of the Creator! To submit to an unequal yoke is a NO –NO!

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think this article fairly represents the meaning of 2 Cor. 6:14? Why? Do churches have license to alter, or pick and choose the part of the Bible they will follow? Do you think God will judge His people with unstated leniency or in strict accord with His Word? If Christians are commanded to not love the world, what would be the basis of fellowship with God if we do love the world?

UNFEIGNED LOVE

“Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently:” I Peter 1:22.

The adjective “unfeigned” is used to describe love two times in the New Testament. It is an interesting and powerful word. Think with me for a minute about it.

In I Peter 1:22 it is used to describe love for the brethren, which is acquired in obedience to the truth through the Spirit. In 2 Cor. 6:6, it is used as the apex of spiritual blessings of pureness, knowledge, longsuffering, and kindness that Paul wanted the Corinthians to have lest they had received the grace of God in vain.

“Unfeigned” is the English translation of the ancient Greek term, “Anupokritos” which was understood to be without dissimulation; without hypocrisy; it is the antithesis of using another’s statement as what one has decided for himself. It is to declare the true belief of one’s heart and readiness to stand on that belief. In this there is no pretense.

This raises some serious questions about modern day discipleship as practiced by far too many who claim the title “Christian.” Who cannot easily recall instances where the right thing was done from a grudging attitude? I do not refer to judging the spirit of others, but to recognizing personal shortcomings.

It is easy to feign love; to render lip service when the heart is not in it. Do people actually go to worship services simply because it is time to do so, and not because they love the Lord, His Word, and His brethren enough to look forward with excitement to the marvelous privilege? Are good deeds done because we “have to,” or because we “get to?” Have missionaries, whose hearts are burdened for others so much that they endure deputation to be able to minister to them, been received out of a sense of obligation instead of joyful excitement over the opportunity to share in their ministry? Do teachers approach class time as obligatory rather than a joyful opportunity? When others fall into misfortune, and a call for help is issued, is there thankfulness for the opportunity or resentment that others must now be temporarily depended upon, but the deed is done because it is felt necessary?

Indeed, there are times when God’s people become weary, not of the way, but in the way. Those are times when drawing closer to the teachings of the Lovely Lord Jesus is underscored. Beating an empty bucket discourages both sheep and shepherd. If there is something to share, excitement is there, and those who have whereof to share will be joyfully excited to fulfill an opportunity. How good it is to be in the company of those who love God, His church, and His Word with discernable unfeigned love. Doubtless, this is the love that Jesus had in mind when He indicated that by this all men would know that we are His disciples.

FOR THOUGHT: When was the last time you fulfilled a spiritual opportunity grudgingly? Think about people and things you love completely and without any negative criticism. Do you think lost people may be somewhat justified in viewing church folks as hypocrites? Why? How would you define “unfeigned” love? Is it discernable in you, in your church?

VAIN JANGLING EVIDENCE

“Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned: From which some having swerved have turned aside unto vain jangling;” 1Timothy 1:5-6.

The early church at Ephesus experienced difficulties due to vain janglers. For that reason, the apostle Paul begged Timothy to remain there as he went on carrying the gospel into Macedonia. Read about it in I Timothy chapter one. Vain janglers and their vain jangling has never stopped, but continually increased by egotistical men and women who would be teachers and ministers of things unknown to them. Think about it for a minute.

God gave Paul tremendous success in Ephesus, as many turned away from sorcery and black magic to trust in Jesus. A powerful church established there, played a fundamental role in the initial spread of Christianity around the Mediterranean Sea.

It was here that seven sons of Sceva were beaten by a demon possessed man as they sought to cash in on the marvelous things Paul was doing in the name of the Lord Jesus. It was quickly perceived that being a teacher of Christianity was arresting to the population and elevating to the teacher, especially those who desired the plaudits of men. Read about it in Acts 19. So, it could almost be predicted that egotistical, but unknowledgeable men would seek to enter into the newly perceived arena.

The apostle called them vain janglers, that is, those given to “vain jangling.” This usage of the appellation occurs singularly in the Bible in I Timothy 1:6. It comes from the ancient Greek language, and it means to talk without specific aim, just talk. It might be illustrated in English as “blah, blah, blah, blah!” These vain janglers set themselves up as teachers of the law, because they knew little to nothing about the grace of God. Moreover, Paul said that they did not know what they were talking about regarding the law either. (v. 7). They just talked and affirmed what knowledgeable people recognized as nonsense.

So, what was the plan to counteract the nonsense? Paul wanted Timothy to charge some that they teach no other doctrine than that they had received of him. Furthermore, Timothy was to charge the church at Ephesus to not give heed to fables and endless genealogies, etc., that men use to prey on the unlearned, and in which there is no godly edifying in the faith.

The scene under consideration happened a long time ago, but neither Timothy, Paul or anyone else put the vain jangling to a permanent close. Their kind has multiplied exponentially over the last two millennia as Satan works furiously in view of his rushing deadline of activity to turn men from God and His Holy Word. It is chic today for ministers to not say “the Bible says” but to say, “I say unto you.” Hummmm! Seems nothing more than ample evidence of a bunch of vain jangling to those who love and wish to be fed with the Word of God!

FOR THOUGHT: Think of an example of vain jangling you have heard recently. How important is it to you that spiritual teachers present the Bible rather than their thoughts? Do you think there are modern vain janglers in the world of Christianity? How do you perceive the work of the seven sons of Sceva in Acts 19?

VOICES FROM THE PAST

"There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world, and none of them is without signification." I Corinthians 14:10.

This writer has attended every annual session of the church messenger meeting known as the American Baptist Association for nearly 60 years with the exception of the meeting in Chattanooga, TN in 2002. The meetings have been honorable, and they have advanced the work of the churches of the Lord on many fronts, especially in missions and literature.

As is true of most deliberative bodies, there have been disagreements, with some rather heated. Still, mutual respect for one another, and for the Word, remained intact. Some of the brethren of the past were most colorful in their thinking, and uniqueness of voice. So unique that it was easy to mimic them in mostly humorous ways. Those older brethren whose lives spanned much of the early days of the association are missed, and it seems their absence created a remaining void. Meetings are now mostly cut and dried; formal; and any disagreement is mild and brief. Of course, the good fellowship is appreciated, but balance may be tossed in the process. Over the years, this writer has learned that disagreement does not mean disagreeable, and contending does not mean contentious. But nowadays it seems actions once initiated become fixed and stale since no one knows how to politely change course, and most are afraid to suggest such for fear of falling under the disdain of others. It provokes a wistful desire for some of the colorful personalities of yesteryear.

During the 2018 meeting in Lexington, KY, this writer was asked by the director of meeting arrangements to present a brief program of voices of the past to a fairly large banquet of seniors (pastors and their wives, and deacons and their wives).

Not being a vocal mime, there were many whose voice eluded me, but it was quite easy to mimic Dr. C. N. Glover, former Secretary/Treasurer of Missions, A. L. Patterson, L.L. Clover of Louisiana, Claude Walker of Mississippi, Vernon Barr of Texas, former Missions Secretary, Edgar N. Sutton, and in substance, the outgoing moderator of the national meeting, Dr. Randy Cloud. The humorous anecdotes were well received since the audience remembered most of the ones being mimicked.

Personally, I like the old paths, tried, true, well worn, and I appreciate the older generation of ministers who stood for their convictions. They could oppose one another vehemently and still be brethren. They would never ask church messengers to engage in the silliness of apologizing to someone they did not know for something they did not do as occurred in the 2017 meeting in Daytona Beach, FL.

Voices of the past! They blazed the trail in Christian honor, and their kind is still held in high esteem by many who knew them. We need more like them today!

FOR THOUGHT: Think about members of the older generations who have impressed you. Do you think the actions of the preceding generation created needless traditions? Where do you think your church or association of churches would be today without the work of the preceding generation(s). Do you think a break with tradition may be good for present and future generations? Why?

WALKING IN THE BRIGHTEST LIGHT - A BETTER CHOICE

Great old hymns call for the dedicated Christian to “Step in the Light”, to “Send the Light”, and other similar admonitions. It may seem astounding that men would prefer to walk in darkness rather than light, but for the majority of the world that is exactly the case. Moreover, it is not a new thing. Jesus Himself forthrightly declared, *“And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.”* John 3:19. Even a Catholic program of a few years ago majored on the theme, “It is better to light a single candle than to curse the darkness.”

Sometimes, the light that men have is more precisely darkness according to the teaching of Jesus. He said in Matthew 6:23, “. . . *If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!*”

John testified of Jesus, *“That was the true light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.”* John 1:9. He previously said of Him in verse 4, *“In him was life; and the life was the light of men.”* So, the light of God that shines through the Eternal Word is life; it is understanding; it is freedom to the captives of sin. Additionally, it is accessed through faith, and its principal gifts are love and hope.

It is inconceivable that one would prefer to walk in darkness once accessing light, but one time this writer determined to walk down a corridor that was pitch black rather than access a light switch. I knew every room and knew I could go right to the correct one. What I had not stopped to consider was that someone left a door wide open in the hallway. The collision left its mark and the sober realization of an act of never-to-be-repeated, sheer stupidity. Still, a lot of folks walk through life in just this way, and (as Dr. John Penn once said) if warned with a blown-out tire, rather than repent, they prefer to purchase a set of blow-out-proof tires.

Doubtless, all who take the name of Christ, as in “Christian,” would do well to consider long and well the strong terms of I John 1:6-7, *“If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth; but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.”* This then is the brightest light. It is not only the better choice. It is the best one!

FOR THOUGHT: How is it possible that the light of some folks may, in fact, be darkness?

What is your basis for determining the difference between light and darkness?

What relationship does light have with life?

Why do men prefer to walk in darkness rather than light?

WARNINGS: WATCHFULNESS OR WARINESS?

Repeated lessons of history reveal consistently that long standing warnings wear hard on the watchful. Negatives are unpopular, and often become burdensome, especially when majored upon as constraints of life. Perhaps too many people have forgotten that a positive cannot exist without a negative. In Eden, Adam and Eve enjoyed the positive life of blessings and fellowship with their Creator. In innocence, they could not understand the far-reaching implications of first-hand involvement in the knowledge of evil. They understood what God told them but comprehending the results of the wrong decision doubtlessly eluded them.

On the other hand, since all of their posterity understand sin really well, warnings are multiplied with the consequences of sin made plain. Think with me about some of those.

Every individual is warned in the most beloved verse of the Bible: *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son; that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."* John 3:16. If the Lord Jesus is not received into one's heart he will perish. Additionally, to Christians, Jesus makes it plain that loss will come to those who ignore the negatives. There are two gates to enter; one is wide, the other is strait; there are two roads to walk; one is broad, the other narrow, with appropriate consequences.

Of his churches, Jesus likened them to a city set on a hill, so men do not light a candle and put it under a basket, but in the candle stick that it should give light to all. Moreover, His people are the salt of the earth, but what if the salt loses its savor? The negative result is that it is good for nothing but to be cast out and trodden under foot.

At His return to earth, he likens churches to ten virgins, five were wise and made preparations, five were foolish and did not. The prepared were blessed, the foolish suffered loss. Thus, the warning to all is to watch!

In the lateness of the hour of history, men have become more wary than watchful. We have grown in the wheat field among the tares until it is hard to tell the difference. Choked by the stony ground and weedy fields, the positive message of Christ and His coming is being laid aside more and more in favor of simple social interaction. But it is still true that those found watching at Jesus' return will be blessed beyond any imagination. *"Then let us not be weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap if we faint not!"* Gal. 6:9.

FOR THOUGHT: Try to think of a negative without a positive, and vice versa.

If the positive aspects of Christianity as set forth in the Bible were constantly emphasized, would there be a need to emphasize the negatives? Why?

Why do you think social interaction often replaces the messages of the Bible?

WEEDS IN FREEDOM'S PATH

"Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong." I Corinthians 16:13.

At Runnymede, England, on June 15, 1215, King John of England sealed with the official seal of royalty what is known as the Magna Carta (The Great Charter).

The Great Charter is hailed as the foundation of democracy in England. It ended the absolute rule of kings by establishing that everybody including the king was subject to the law.

Of course, not everyone was happy with it as originally written, so it was revised in 1225 by King Henry III. Three clauses of the revised version remain on the books of England to this day. Although most of the document has been reshaped to modern times, the Magna Carta remains a milestone of liberty; a rallying cry against the arbitrary use of power by one or a few, and a foundation to other national documents of liberty, including those of the U. S.

The remaining clauses of the important document state: *"No free man shall be seized or imprisoned, or stripped of his rights or possessions, or outlawed or exiled, or deprived of his standing in any other way, nor will we proceed with force against him, or send others to do so, except by the lawful judgement of his equals or by the law of the land. To no one will we sell, to no one deny or delay right or justice."*

A number of years ago, this writer was privileged to visit the place where the Magna Carta was signed. In search of the site where a monument is set to commemorate the historical event, one had to crawl through or over a fence, and wade a patch of weeds to find the monument among grassy growth. It felt good to stand there, and to read the monument, but its lack of care evoked a sense of sadness.

In like manner, there is a document so much more important to every human being on earth. It is the document of liberty, life, and eternal destiny; the document of the Creator God to all who bear His image. Its message brings so much joy to all who read and heed it, but it is largely obscured in the weed patch of modern life.

FOR THOUGHT: What do you know about this document from heaven? What does it mean to you?

How does the weed patch at the Magna Carta monument symbolize ideas and policies that erode principles of freedom?

How does I Corinthians 16:13 play into the principles of freedom?

WHAT DAY IS THE LORD'S DAY?

"Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it. Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ." Colossians 2:14-17.

Why do Christians use the first day of the week for the day of collective worship in their church houses when the seventh day is the Old Testament precedent? To many, this is a good question, while to some, it is critical. What is one to think?

It is true that God engaged in six solar days of creative acts per Genesis One, but ceased from creation, and rested on the seventh day. He also hallowed it. Then the symbolism of that rest lay dormant for the next 2500 years in which there was no law of God given to govern worship activities. Then in the Exodus from Egypt, God gave the Hebrews His holy law to govern every aspect of their lives. They were to labor six days, and rest on the seventh day. There were teeth in that law. Those who despised it died without mercy. So, for the next 1500 years, the Hebrews observed the seventh day as a holy day in which no work or recreational activity occurred, and travel was severely restricted. This seventh day was also observed by Jesus and the apostles since they lived under the authority of the Mosaic Law.

However, included among the purposes of Jesus' life and ministry was the fulfilling and subsequent removal of the Mosaic Law as a governing instrument. The law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ. Thus, in his ministry, Jesus said the law of Moses would remain intact until every jot and title (comma and period) were fulfilled. Accordingly, He did fulfill it by his total righteousness, and having fulfilled it, took it out of the way. Col. 2:14-17. No longer are His people under edict about certain foods. Lev. 11, holy days, Col 2:16, mixtures of material in clothing. Deut. 22:11, etc., etc.

Our Wonderful Lord and Savior who fulfilled the law and paid for our sins in His substitutionary death on the Cross, arose from the dead on the first day of the week. Thus, from that time forward did the early churches meet on the first day of the week to worship and to celebrate His victorious resurrection. John 20:19, Acts 20:7. Also, the apostolic instructions regarding the collection of mission funds included the first day of the week, when the church would be meeting. I Cor. 16:1.

Finally, one may notice that there is no specified baseline from which to calculate the number placement of the days of the week. That is governed by the calendar which is man-made, and which has changed a number of times throughout history. What this means is that if our calendars were to be rearranged so that our Tuesday became the first day of the week and Monday the seventh, legalists would insist on worship on Monday while those depending on grace would insist on worshipping on Tuesday since that would be the day representative of the resurrection of Jesus.

All that said, every day is the Lord's day. One day is not any more holy than another day, and all days are to be lived in recognition of the Savior; in personal submission to the teachings of His Word; in a lifestyle that one may, as the apostle Paul said, *"Pray without ceasing,"* and looking for His glorious second coming to receive His people unto Himself. After all, it is not the day that is worshipped, but the Lord of the day!

FOR THOUGHT: Does the expression "The Lord's Day" refer to the seventh day of a calendar, or may it mean the first day of a calendar week, or could it possibly reference the millennial

reign of Christ when He returns to earth?

Was the Old Testament Sabbath a day of worship or a day of rest?

Why did the first church choose to collectively worship on the first day of the week?

What does Col 2:14-17 say about being judged in respect of a holy day?

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

“The Bible says _____!” “Well, let me tell you what I think”. “My opinion is _____.” Thus are varied and conflicting ideas set forth, often with strong convictions. But therein is a significant problem. It seems most documents are interpreted in accord with the common rules of interpretation, “Who is speaking.” “About what is he speaking.” “To whom is he speaking.” “When is he speaking.” So, why does this sensible rule of interpretation become grossly ignored regarding the Holy Scriptures? But it does, and this fact alone is responsible for much heretical religion that flies under the banner of Christianity.

There is no greater Bible interpreter than the Bible itself! The plenary, verbal inspiration of the scriptures must be accepted as truth, and since it is impossible for God to lie, there are no contradictions in the Bible, rather unity, harmony, and symmetry prevail relentlessly. This means that if one party interprets the Bible one way and another party interprets it another way, one or both are wrong! One's thinking and opinions must give way to what the Bible actually says in its harmonious whole. It is interesting to note that the term “opinion” comes from the ancient Greek “harises” from which the term “heresy” originates. Often, nominal Christians do not want to hear “The Bible says....” They rather want to hear “This what I believe or what I say.” Thus does the word of confused, sinful men supplant the import of Holy Writ in the minds of not a few churchgoers.

So, what is one to make of all this? Hear the Word! *“Knowing this first, that no prophecy [telling forth] of the scripture is of any private interpretation.”* I Peter 3:17. Therefore, if one verse of scripture appears to contradict another one, much study is demanded to understand the harmony of the two. Accordingly, the scriptures themselves emphasize the necessity of their being studied. *“Study to show thyself approved unto God a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”* II Tim. 2:15. If much study is needful to correctly divide the word of truth, one may be sure that a lack of study will guarantee wrong divisions and subsequent misunderstanding. Truth is never contradictory. The Bible says what it means, and means what it says, and is not subject to the opinions and platitudes of men or groups of men who refuse to deal honestly with the entire content.

FOR THOUGHT: What may “opinion” and “heresy” have in common?

Do the scriptures themselves emphasize the need for study? Why?

What does “private interpretation” of the scriptures mean?

WHAT GOD REQUIRES OF YOU!

Chief among the debates of religionists and armchair seers is, what does God require of men? The answer is myriad, but most of them possess the common denominator of the created dictating to the Creator what is acceptable to believe and do. Will the clay chide the potter saying, "Why have you made me thus?" Think with me for a moment!

Some men say that it is essential for one to be the beneficiary of the rituals and rites of their particular brand of religion. This may include a sprinkling at birth or later learning to recite a creed or complete a catechism or becoming a *bona fide* member of their particular order. Others contend that it is a live-it-or-lose-it scenario, ultimately leaving the power of salvation within the works of men rather than God.

Moreover, others think to fulfill the requirement of God by keeping the Law. In fact, many do well at keeping most of its precepts, but they slip up on some others. That makes them lawbreakers instead of law keepers, according to James 2:10. Beside this, if any man could have kept the Law, it would not have been necessary for Jesus to die for our sins. The purpose of the Law was to magnify sin, and to point men to the only fountain of grace, Christ Jesus.

Additionally, some think there is no need to be concerned about it because all things are predestined from the foundation of the world. That means some are predestined to be saved and there is nothing that will prevent it, and some are predestined to be lost, and nothing can be done about it. That is a complete negation of the "whosoever" of many scriptures.

The wise person will not seek eternal answers from sinful mankind but look rather to the infinite Word of the Creator about those eternal verities that affect the never-dying soul. Thus, it is written in Ecclesiastes 12:13, *"Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man."* Fear God and keep His commandments! Is this not what the first commandment is saying? *"And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might."* Deut. 6:5.

In the days of Jesus' ministry, there were those who forthrightly asked, *"What shall we do, that we might work the works of God?"* Jesus replied, *" . . . This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent."* John 6:28-29. That means believe His person, His words, and His works. What one really believes is manifest by what he does! *"Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man."*

FOR THOUGHT: How many good works must one do to be acceptable to God?
 How does James 2:10 reveal that no one may rightly claim to be a law keeper?
 How does Solomon's information in Ecc. 12:13, and the first commandment match?
 What is the fallacy of seeking eternal truth from men instead of the Word?

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE “ANA” HAPPENS TO THE “BAPTISTS”

Baptist people, true to the foretelling of Jesus, have an age long history of treatment similar to the treatment Jesus received. After all, the servant is not greater than his Lord, and if the world hated Jesus, it will also hate His churches. It is interesting to note that historians of most every major denomination of “Christian” religion bears testimony to the lineage of Baptist churches all the way back to the days of the apostles. They also bear testimony to their persecution throughout the age. Accordingly, the persecuted people were forced to be vagabonds and nomads, moving from place to place as their houses, lands, and worship houses were confiscated and burned. In Italy they were called Novations and Paterines. In Armenia they were called Paulicans. In North Africa they were called Donatists. In other places of Europe, they were known as Petro-Brussians, Henricians, and Waldenses. These were oft named by others in reference to strong leaders among them. In every place their numbers were great, and their churches numbered in the hundreds. Because of the common, consistent faith that has always marked Baptist congregations, and because they would accept no other baptism than their own, they were called Anabaptists regardless of what names others applied to them.

Now fast forward in history to the colonization of America. Baptists came as individuals and sometimes as entire congregations on the same ships to a new land where the prospects of freedom in general, and religious freedom in particular, were prospects. In this new land the “Ana” was dropped, and they were known simply as “Baptists.” In a relatively short time these churches grew and multiplied prolifically, but so did Catholic and Protestant bodies as well as upstarts that may be classified as Neo-Protestants. All advanced in unparalleled material riches esteemed to be the blessings of God more so than their spiritual heritage. In them they spiritually slept. Soon large numbers of Baptist churches began to recognize, and to accept the baptism of religious bodies foreign to their own faith. Then, no longer known as Anabaptists (re-baptizers), they also lost distinction as “Baptists.” The embrace of alien immersion and/or no immersion carries with it the doctrines of universal, invisible church, open communion, and total loss of church discipline. It is the end of a scriptural New Testament church. Those who shared the common New Testament Faith a few centuries ago never officially called themselves Anabaptists but considered it an honor that others so dubbed them. In modern times, Baptist churches never copyrighted the name “Baptist,” but considered it an honor to be so known. Now, alas, for many, both the “Ana” and the “Baptist” no longer can be worn as a badge of honor. Both are discarded, with the exception of a few, in favor of being unified with a religious world far afield from the faith once delivered to the saints. It is sadly true, that what happened to the “Ana” has also happened to the “Baptists” in many cases. What will they do when at midnight a shout is made, “The bridegroom cometh?!” Matthew 25:6.

FOR THOUGHT: How has materialism and freedom been both a blessing and a curse to people of faith?

Is it important to you to identify with faith of New Testament origin?

WHAT IS NEW ABOUT THE NEW TESTAMENT?

“In that he saith, A new covenant, he hath made the first old. Now that which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away.” Hebrews 8:13.

This question, “What is new about the New Testament?” was posed to a group of seasoned church folks a number of years ago. Some were dumbfounded. Others had a look of incredulity on their face that such a question would be asked in the first place. Still others were intrigued with the question and were genuinely interested in what the answer would be. Most were in agreement that salvation by grace was the essential new thing. Really?! If scholarship is that bad in the pews, what does that say about the pulpit?

Salvation of the spirit of man by grace through faith plus nothing else is as old as the Garden of Eden. Moreover, there has never been but one plan of spiritual salvation from then until now. So, it is not that. But what can it be? This had become a precious teaching moment. The ensuing discussion contrasted the Law Covenant with the Church Covenant. Moreover, it was amazing how many pieces of the Bible puzzle came together for several in the group. The New Testament church is a new covenant to govern the life of God’s people in the age of grace. That covenant is expressed in terms such as “the faith once delivered to the saints.” That faith embraced by men creates a local New Testament church, “...*which is the fullness of Him that filleth all in all*,” Eph. 1:23. It is the body of Christ, and the pillar and ground of the truth, Col 1:18. I Tim. 3:15. Although filled with saved sinners, that body of Christ acts as the executive in kingdom affairs, and has the ability to carry on the work of Jesus properly because it is the recipient of the guidance of the Holy Spirit that took up residence within it on the ancient day of Pentecost. Acts 2.

The emphasis then, by the term “New Testament” underscores it as the plan of God to bring men to a high level of spiritual maturity, enabling them to rule and reign with Him in the next age that is about to happen. Folks who get their name on a church roll then drop out of sight, thinking they have all they need are in for a rude awakening when they stand before Jesus and witness their fruitless life burned as wood, hay, and stubble. Moreover, pity the church member who has warmed the pews but learned nothing new to him for forty years! God’s people desperately need to be active students in the University of Jesus, the Christ. By the way, there is no baccalaureate degree offered there, and the course work never ends. But the reward is astronomical!

FOR THOUGHT: What do you consider to be new about the New Testament?
 What does the expression “the faith once delivered to the saints” mean to you?
 Name three things found in this article as biblical descriptions of the church.
 What role does the church play in the present phase of the kingdom of heaven?

WHAT IS THE ESCAPE PLAN??

The Hebrew epistle presses the question at Heb. 2:3, *"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."* Think with me about the what, who, and how!

The use of first-person plural "we" includes the human writer which is believed to be the apostle Paul. Those addressed are those of like faith and order (primarily Hebrew Christians) and extending throughout the age to the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. The "what" is named "salvation", modified as "so great." It is further modified as the salvation which first began to be spoken of by our Lord (Jesus, the Christ), and then relayed to us by those who actually walked with Him and heard firsthand, the tenets of that great salvation. The salvation under consideration then is not the initial "new birth" spiritual experience since that is as old as Adam's sin, and was already present in the subjects so addressed as "we." Thus, it is salvation of the mind-life of spiritually saved people via correct understanding and application of the eternal Word.

To neglect so great salvation is to fail to study to rightly divide the Word of Truth, 2 Tim. 2:15. It is choosing to not be transformed by the renewing of the mind so that the perfect will of God may be correctly understood and applied; to be in favor of conformation to this present evil world system. Romans 12:1-3. It is failure to stop laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, then failure to go on to perfection in receiving and understanding the doctrines of the New Testament. Hebrews 6:1-4. It is not working out your salvation with fear and trembling, Phil 2:12. It is through these aforementioned things that the righteous are saved with difficulty. 1 Peter 4:8. It is through these things that we lose not those things which we have wrought but receive a full reward. 2 John 1:8.

What is there for God's people to escape? It is seeing the value of their lifetime on earth burned as wood, hay, stubble, at the Judgment seat of Christ. 1 Cor. 3:9-16.

So, the question remains, "How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation....." The answer is simple and to the point, "There is no other escape plan!" It logically falls then that time spent with the Bible in meditation on its meaning is the most important time anyone spends on earth.

FOR THOUGHT: What do you know about that Book of Books? How are you spending the days of your years?

If salvation of the spirit of man is fully affected by grace through faith, then is discipleship all that important?

What is the difference between the Great White Throne Judgment and the Judgment Seat of Christ? Who will be judged at each? Why will the life of Christians be judged?

If a believer is saved, yet so as by fire, 1 Cor. 3:9-16, what could be his loss?

WHAT WAS ABRAHAM LOOKING FOR?

Of Abraham the Bible states: *"By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God."* Hebrews 11:9-10.

Have you ever wondered just what Abraham was looking for? Is a city simply a cluster of buildings and streets? Is it simply a collection of a number of people in a specific place? Would buildings abandoned be a city or an abandoned construction project? Could there be a significant collection of people without the trappings of buildings and streets? No, I have not lost it, so think with me. Modern dictionaries define a city as larger than a village or town, but never specific as to numbers. Specific definitions include, "a collection of a large number of people in a permanent place." But, back to the scriptures, buildings have a foundation, but has there ever been a city with a foundation? If so, it must be principles and not materials. For example, out west, one may find ghost towns long abandoned whose foundation was the "get rich quick" scheme of mining gold. The foundation crumbled, and so did the town. Abraham looked for a city not made with hands, whose builder and maker is God; hence, one with divine foundations. He found it!

Such a city is readied in eternity for a special people. It is described in Revelation 22. Note that the gates are representative of the twelve tribes of Israel, but the foundations, likened unto precious stones, are representative of the 12 apostles of the Lord's New Testament Church. This would seem to be in reverse, that perhaps Israel should be the foundation and the church, the gates, but no. The great final expression of the Kingdom of God rests on the fully matured saints that manifest the ground of truth which is the true church, and it came into existence through the gates of Old Testament Israel, the covenant people of God at the time. Friends, I, too, am looking for that city built without hands, whose builder and maker is God. Like ancient Abraham, I, too, shall find it, and enjoy its environment through the eternal eons. Presently, it is seen only through the medium of faith, but the good news is that its possession is within the scope of every person by faith in God and His Holy Word. Are you, as Isaac was, a child of promise? Are you looking for such a city?

FOR THOUGHT: How does a material foundation compare with purpose or principal foundation?

What kind of city do you think Abraham sought as described being made without hands?

How is it rational that the foundation of New Jerusalem described in Revelation 22 should be the apostles of the Lord's church rather than the tribes of Israel?

Do you think of such a city as your own personal, eternal home?

WHAT YOU DO VS. WHAT YOU SAY

“ . . . shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works”
James 2:18.

Personal conduct most often speaks more loudly, and certainly more forcefully, than words. A personal experience underscores this statement. Allow me to share it with you.

A number of years ago, Laura and I were sent to Australia to assist the first missionary of the churches of the American Baptist Association to that continent. Fellowship, preaching, encouragement, and help in locating and securing property for a permanent site all made up the objectives of the trip.

Initial excitement soon turned into disappointment as the change of airplanes in Los Angeles did not go smoothly. An announcement by the airline that the intended aircraft had a cracked windshield, grounding it for repairs, was not greeted kindly by some of the passengers. News that it may be six or more hours before substitution by another craft made it worse.

A Public Relations move by the airline emerged. Everyone would be bussed to a fine hotel for a meal, leisure time, and drinks. There, Laura and I were the only ones not soaking up the liquor. In fact, hotel personnel had to be argued with briefly to produce a simple Coca-Cola.

Later, all the passengers were aboard the substituted aircraft when an announcement was made of an apologetic sort. It concluded by saying passengers could have as many drinks as they wanted without charge. Soon, the entire cabin was filled with inebriated folks. One lady unsteadily made her way to our row of seats and stated, somewhat slurring, “You must be a padre!” When asked why she would think such a thing she stated that we were the only two people on the plane not drinking. I did confess to being a Christian, a minister of the gospel, but not a padre! Sure enough, when the plane landed in Honolulu, we were about the only couple who could get off the plane unassisted.

But the point is, the power of our testimony projected itself in quiet deportment. This point, noted by philosophers and statesmen, recently flashed boldly again on a T-shirt, which put it this way, “How can I believe what you say when I see what you do!” How important it is for a Christian that words and actions coincide. How unfortunate it is when they do not. It is reminiscent of a statement made by Jesus regarding the hypocrisy so prevalent in His day. *“This people draw nigh unto me with their lips, but their heart is far from me.”* Blessed indeed is that one who controls his tongue, and whose deportment empowers his words to the glory of God. *“For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.”* James 3:2. He continues to call such a self-controlled individual a perfect man.

FOR THOUGHT: Think of someone you have met whose words and actions were not in sync with the Christianity they professed. How did that make you feel?

Think of someone who stands out in your mind whose words and actions were very much in sync with their Christian testimony. How does that make you feel?

Is it important to you to reveal your faith by what you say and do?

WHERE THERE IS LOVE, THERE IS LEARNING

Love is a highly prized dimension of life, but unfortunately, it is considered to be a non-essential to the majority of the world. Some would say, "Now hold on there, preacher! Psychologists insist that love is essential to wellbeing." Well, injecting "well-being" into the thought creates a different equation, but just think with me for a minute!

In the great love chapter of the Bible, I Cor. 13, Paul said he might speak with the tongues of men and of angels without it. He went on to say that he might possess the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and knowledge, even possess such faith as to move mountains, without love. He could be kindly minded toward the poor and become a sacrificial martyr without love. But all of that would be for nothing...FOR NOTHING! It is love that survives, that perseveres, that counts for something, both in time and eternity.

Love is not static! It goes to the depths of problems. It is active in longsuffering, promoting others, hoping, believing, enduring, bearing all things. It rejoices not in iniquity, but in truth! Let the meaning of these words be applied then to the average Christian in modern times. Do they fit well, or seem to be all out of kilter with the status quo?

Most churchgoers will tell you he loves the Lord, loves His Word, loves His church, but these are words; too often hollow words. Hollow words find their satisfaction in detached, mostly ritualistic, habitual actions of religion, but are void of personal communion and growth in the grace of God, and in His inexhaustible Word. It is sad! Certainly, one can live in the same house with a spouse, provide material things, and appear to be the envy of the world, but not have love for that spouse, or for the true meaning of a home. This is often true in describing professing Christians. One might do well to ask himself how much time he has spent in prayer or in reading the Holy Word lately. One would do well to ask of self just when was the last time personal faith was shared outside the walls of a church house? One would do well to ask himself, when was the last time he actually learned anything at all from the Bible that had not resided in his consciousness previously?

Consider that a small child was given a wing pin by a pilot in an airport. He proudly proclaimed to his mother that he was now a pilot. His mother replied to him that in his eyes he was a pilot, and in her eyes, he was a pilot, but in the eyes of a pilot, he was no pilot at all. Could this also illustrate the status of many professing church members. It is easy to say, "I love the Lord," but love is not static. Love is active. Where love is, there is growth, progress, learning!

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think love is static or active? Why?

What do you think of Paul's exaltation of love (charity) in I Corinthians 13?

What are some ways love can be practically demonstrated for God, for church, for individuals?

WHO'S RESPONSIBLE? NOT I

The new company boss called a meeting of employees, and asked, "Who is responsible around here?" Without hesitation one fellow near the back of the room raised his hand and boldly said, "I am." "And on what basis do you make that claim?" replied the boss. The man responded, "Well, when anything goes wrong or breaks around here everyone points to me and says, 'You are responsible!'" Of course, that is not exactly what the boss had in mind, but that is just about the only way folks are known as responsible in these modern days of spin, shirk, and "leave it to someone else." However, responsibility denied does not mean responsibility removed. Think about it!

There is innate, individual responsibility universally. Every person who has reached the age of accountability, and who is not mentally impaired, is responsible for the eternal destiny of his never-dying soul. The possibility of eternal life was once-for-all procured by the sacrifice of the sinless Son of God on behalf of the entire race. The Bible is clear. There will be no excuse for any person leaving this world as a stranger to God's love gift for all of Adam's posterity. Responsibility lies squarely and heavily on each one.

Furthermore, the time is coming when every born-again Christian will stand before the judgment seat of Christ to give an account of the deeds done in the body regardless of their nature. 2 Cor. 5:10. This is not to determine who is lost or saved, rather to receive reward for Christian service. Whether one's life is filled with works likened unto wood, hay, stubble, gold, silver, precious stones, is entirely up to each one for how they have sought knowledge of God through His eternal Word and dedicated themselves by submission to that knowledge.

Finally, even those who leave this world without repentance from sin, and receiving Jesus as their personal savior, will stand before God in the Great White Throne Judgment. The books will be opened, and they will see that their name is not in the Lamb's Book of Life, and they will know, perhaps shockingly, that they alone are responsible for their eternal destiny. Every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall confess, but in a time and environment of "too late!" Since that is ultimately true, how much better, both for time and eternity, it is that such actions should be undertaken while acting responsibly is accepted. Who is responsible? Sure enough, it is each person! Francois Baptist Church is full of folks that will be happy to help you sort that out.

FOR THOUGHT: Have you assumed responsibility for your own eternal destiny?
What are the two judgments for people that the Bible presents?
What will be the basis for judgment in each of those?

WHY DO THEY DO IT THAT WAY?

“Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.” 2 Thessalonians 2:15.

Some things change over the course of time. Some things must not change. In elective matters of life, traditions, etc., change is inevitable. Sometimes it is so complete that future generations think the original to be strange. For instance, the Bible says, “Greet all the brethren with a holy kiss.” 1 Thess. 5:26 et.al. That was a common, traditional greeting many hundreds of years ago. Now, the brethren would be more comfortable if the saying was, “Greet all the sisters with a holy kiss.” (I am joking!) Actually, the “holy kiss” has given way to the common handshake or affectionate hug. It is so different that if one were to practice the original greeting today then doubtless others would say, “Why is this done this way?”

Perhaps the illustration is crude, but that is exactly the case with Baptists and communion (the Lord’s Supper). Most Baptist churches practice the Lord’s Supper today as it was originally set by Jesus so long ago. However, the last two hundred years has seen so much infusion of new denominations whose race to garner numbers of people have forced them into common, human concessions around the Lord’s Supper, and other doctrinal matters, that the original seems odd to them. That is why so many today say of Baptists, “Why do they do it that way?”

Regarding the Lord’s Supper, it was originally set in the church, and all church members were saved, scripturally baptized, and covenanted together to carry out the great commission in disciplined fellowship. If that pattern is followed today, then anyway one may stack it, it means closed communion, the position of most Baptist Churches. Others may say, “Why do they do it that way?” It is simply a matter of staying as close to the scriptures and commands of Jesus as possible, rather than seeing how far away one can get and still be considered a “Christian.” One may say that such positions offend people. That may be true, but their offense is not with the practitioner, it is with the author of the instructions.

Well, one might say, “What is the difference, anyway?” Not much. One way is wrong, the other is right. It all depends on one’s regard for the scriptures (we have no authority to change them), and whether one wants to be wrong or right. What difference does it make whether one is wrong or right? That depends on the subject. In salvation, it means the difference between heaven and hell as an eternal home. In matters of the Lord’s Supper, if it is done wrong, it invites premature physical death and/or damnation (condemnation) at the judgment seat of Christ. 1 Cor. 11:27-30. However, if it made no difference at all, it is still better to be right than to be wrong.

FOR THOUGHT: Should Christian doctrines and practices be as close as possible to the Bible, or is it just fine to take liberty to change Bible examples and commands?

Do you believe the Bible teaches that communion or The Lord’s Supper is to be restricted to the church or freely offered to any and all willing to partake of it?

Do you think every individual will give account to Jesus about how he has received and put into practice His teachings?

WHY? MOTIVATION'S EXAMINATION

It is not unusual for adults to tire easily over the apparent, endless curiosity of a small child. From such questions as "Where do the white clouds go at night," to "How does this work," to endless interrogatives "Why?", the pressing need for information to bring order, understanding, and meaning to life itself persists, and that is so good! It is a shame that much of that is lost in mature adulthood (after all, one does not want to appear to be ignorant.) Ultimately, it is a loss that bears its own irrevocable reward in time and eternity. Think about it!

I relate here an old story of an ambitious preacher's nightmare. A young minister whose zeal far outstripped his wisdom came face to face with his religious motivation one fateful night. In his dream, he met and had a conversation with the Lord. He earnestly besought the Lord to make him a popular, widely accepted preacher. To his dismay, the Lord simply asked, "Why?" Somewhat befuddled, he went on to say that he wanted to be respected as a wise, holy man among his peers. Again, the Lord retorted, "Why?" The preacher quickly searched for an answer to the unexpected question. He stated that he wanted to build a large, megachurch with multiple staff and magnificent choirs. Once more, the Lord asked "Why?" It was then that he awakened with profound thoughts to settle, all relating to the piercing question, "Why?" All of God's people, and especially the ministers of the gospel, would do well to identify with the ambitious preacher after his dream, rather than before it. Spiritual realities are often far removed from fleshly religion, no matter how noble the intent may be.

Truly, to be legitimately added to the church of the Lord Jesus, in covenant relationship with Him, is a deep, personal, spiritual state to be nourished through the sustainment and constraints of the Word. Failure in this discipleship will find one sinking into the perpetual status quo of spiritual infancy, in which the flesh delights in the external talking points of religion, as Paul told Timothy, *"...having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof."*

On the other hand, realizing He must increase, but I must decrease, subjugates any religious pomp of man to the well-grounded status of belonging to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is He who gives the increase, and except He build the house, labor is in vain, and the degree of glory one might receive from the plaudits of men is the degree of robbery perpetrated upon His work. I do not reference or laud spiritual lethargy, but commitment without reservation to the King of glory. Jesus underscored this principle in His kingdom parables, saying: *"So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.'"* Luke 17:10.

FOR THOUGHT: Identify at least four motives of religious activity you think some people use that is improper?

Do you feel that formal religious practice apart from spiritual contact with God appeals to a true Christian?

What did Paul mean when he wrote about a form of godliness that denies the power of it?

Does the writing of Luke 17:10 leave room for personal ego in religious accomplishments?

Why?

WHY SALVATION MUST BE BY GRACE AND BY MAN

The hereditary depravity of the total man is real. That reality constitutes the greatest reason that salvation must be by grace (totally unmerited favor). Since it is undisputedly, biblically true, that all have sinned, and none doeth good, no, not one, then it is literally impossible for anyone to erase his sins and elevate himself to a state of righteousness. If one is to know freedom from sin and a state of righteousness, it must be provided by one who is himself righteous.

To this end, God, the Creator, became a man, and in the form of sinful man, lived without sin, and on the cross paid the price of God's condemnation upon all sin. Jesus then is the substitute for every person who repents of sins and places faith in Him. Paul told the Ephesians, *"For by grace through faith are ye saved and that not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast."* Ephesians 2:8-10.

At this point, the warped thinking of sinful man often enters. His thinking leads him to focus on what he does not understand, about what grace means. He sometimes admits that salvation is the free gift of God; hence, it is by grace, but adds that certain ordinances and/or lifestyles must consistently accompany the free gift, or it will be forfeited. Paul's argument with such legalists is that you can't have it both ways. It is either by grace or by works. The two do not mix. If works enters into the spiritual salvation experience, then it is no more of grace, and it is evident that by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.

Moreover, Paul explains to the Corinthians in Chapter Fifteen that as by man sin came, so by man must salvation and justification come. Because every member of the human family is a sinner, that leaves mankind pretty well destitute. This is exactly why God became a man and as the God-Man, fulfilled the terms of the law, and paid the sin penalty. So since by Adam came sin, so by Jesus, salvation from sin and eternal righteousness comes. God in human form succeeded where Adam failed. I Corinthians 15 powerfully presents the contrast.

Now, all of us may rejoice because one of us (Jesus) succeeded and arose from the dead and is seated at the right hand of the Heavenly Father. Because He overcame, we, too, may overcome IN HIM. It is all summarized in the most familiar passage of scripture, *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have EVERLASTING LIFE."* John 3:16 (Emphasis mine). Thank God for wonderful, marvelous grace! But grace extends far beyond the spiritual salvation experience. Grace is also a way of life that allows born-again folks to achieve a high degree of spiritual maturity. John 1:17. Thank God that the spiritual salvation He can give is 100 percent by grace through faith, plus nothing! Thank God that we may, and certainly should, predicate upon the new birth, continue growing in the knowledge of the truth to a highly rewardable state of spiritual maturity!

FOR THOUGHT: What do you think is meant by the phrase "salvation by grace alone"?
 Why was it necessary for the salvation of men to be provided by a man?
 If all men are sinners, how could salvation be provided by a man?
 May the works of sinful men play any part in salvation by grace? Why?

WILL A MAN ROB GOD?

I know, I know! Everybody's mind is made up from the title of this article what it is going to be all about. When pastors choose this title, and use Malachi 3:8, it is almost always a message about giving money to the cause of the church. So how could this be any different? Well, think with me and see!

Certainly, a lot of churchgoers do rob God in the matters of tithes and offerings, as the context of this Old Testament passage indicates, but that is not the primary burden of this article. Robbery of God takes on a much grander scale, of which monetary giving is but a symptom. Consider that when one repents from sin and receives Christ Jesus into his heart, he is born from above and his spirit sealed with the Holy Spirit of God. That person has been purchased by the shed blood of Jesus. He is no longer his own, but a subject of Jesus. As such, he is to render praise and honor to his Savior (how logical). So, what do many do? They find any excuse, and the slightest one at that, to miss church worship services or to give themselves in any noticeable way, to honor the God of their salvation. Many who do this would be embarrassed beyond words if called upon to lead in prayer, because prayer is a stranger to them. Will a man then rob God of the just honor due Him? Will a man rob God of the glory He is to receive from him in His church, or of His rightful place in his heart? Will a man rob God of His rightful place in his home, or of the power of personal testimony that he is failing to share with others? How many ways modern Christians do rob God!

Doubtless, the problem is a heart problem! Moreover, that speaks to one's attitude toward tithes and offerings. Jesus pungently said it when He taught that where a man's heart is, there will be his treasure also. So, look around. Where does your money go? Where is your leisure time spent? Where do you find your joy? There is where your treasure is. Certainly, it is a precious few who find their heart and their treasure in the things of God. Among many the decision is repeatedly made to rob God! It is the kind of robbery that a sermon, or brow-beating, or grudging change will NOT fix. It is the kind that underscores heart trouble.

Knowing that we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ to give an account of deeds, whether they are good or evil, wisdom cries out for a return of the heart to the God who bought it with His precious blood. When that cry is heeded, all the other things will be fixed.

FOR THOUGHT: Does God actually have a claim on anyone accepting His salvation? Does a Christian have a right to live his own way when his way and the way of God conflict? Do you believe carnal-minded believers actually do rob God by how they live? How may a wayward Christian cease to rob God?

WORSHIP IN SONG

The Bible enjoins disciples of Jesus to rejoice and worship in song. Not many of us are blessed with a terrific singing voice, but a joyful noise is within the capability of almost everyone.

The writings of the Apostle Paul include such admonitions as, *“Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.* Eph 5:19, and *“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.

There are distinct types of songs used in churches today, and a variety of them wisely and discreetly used, can do much as effective expressions of worship from truly grateful hearts. In generations gone by, the songs of the people so commonly expressed in Stamps-Baxter music books were overwhelmingly preferred. Later, a shift was made to higher church hymns, almost exclusively. Still more recent are the chorus songs of few words and much repetition. Some call them 7/11 songs because they contain about eleven words, and congregations are required to sing them seven times. Of course, that is sarcasm from those who prefer other types of songs and hymns.

However, musical expressions of worship should bring joy, not controversy, to the Christian heart. So, wise is the song leader who chooses variety, even if some of the songs do not fit his/her preference. The worship experience is not just for the song leader or any one segment or group in the congregation, but for all.

Whose heart is not touched in gratitude, deeply expressed by such hymns as “Amazing Grace,” “There is a Fountain Filled with Blood,” “Brethren, We Have Met to Worship,” “Rock of Ages,” etc. At the same time, how uplifting and joyful are spiritual songs such as “I’ll Fly Away,” “Just A Little Talk with Jesus,” “On the Jericho Road,” “In the Sweet By And By,” etc.

Yes, there should by all means be room for choruses, too. If the words are good, the melody pleasant, sing them with joy, but not seven times; two should be enough. I choose to worship my God and Savior in a joyful noise of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs . . . and . . . choruses, too.

FOR THOUGHT: Why is a variety of worshipful songs a good thing in modern day worship? How important is it to you that hymns or spiritual songs touch your heart and leave you uplifted? How patient should Christians be with music not of their preference that is a blessing to others? Does the Bible actually encourage worship in a variety of musical categories?

YE ARE COME TO WHAT?

“But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel.” Heb 12:22-24.

There is much to glean from these verses of scripture. They center on the contrast between the law and the church, as expressed by “church of the firstborn.” Here, the Old Testament world of shadows and symbols, and the New Testament world of realities, match in a most thrilling way.

It begins in the Hebrews’ exodus from Egypt. God purchased to Himself the firstborn by the blood of the Passover Lamb. He emphatically proclaimed to the Hebrews that the first fruits of man, beast, the field, etc., belonged to Him, and as such, must be yielded to Him or redeemed with a fair price. Soon a census was taken, and the tribe of Levi almost perfectly matched in number the total of firstborn saved from death by the Passover blood. Whereupon God traded the firstborn back to the Hebrews for the entire tribe of Levi, who would produce the priests and minister about holy things. It is important to connect the dots here. The Old Testament priests then became representative of the firstborn ones from Egypt and foreshadowed the priesthood of the New Testament church.

The Levitical priesthood was destined to cease, giving way to another priesthood, and another high priest after the order of Melchizedek, who would serve the covenant people of God without end. He, of course, is Jesus, who is THE FIRST BORN from the dead among many brethren.

When the New High Priest fulfilled every jot and tittle of the Mosaic Law, he redeemed His people of covenant out from under the Old and into the New. The expression of the New Covenant among men is the New Testament Church, purchased with His own blood, and the pillar and ground of the truth. Soon after the empowerment of the church by the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, gentiles were added as it grew by leaps and bounds under the missionary efforts of the Apostle Paul and others. The people of this New Covenant are called the “Israel of God”. Gal. 6:16. Moreover, Peter calls them “a royal priesthood”. I Peter 2:9. Consequently, the writer of Hebrews emphasizes that we are no longer under the law. We have not come to Mt. Sinai, but to Mt. Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem . . . to the church of the firstborn.... But while we have this blessed status and enjoy the understanding and spiritual maturity it affords us, there is much greater personal responsibility regarding submission to the instructions of Christ Jesus, our eternal high priest. We must not turn away from Him who has spoken to us. We must learn to worship and serve God acceptably. While it is sweet to enjoy our relationship with Him as our Loving Heavenly Father, we must hear the following verses in Hebrews as well and know that our God is indeed a consuming fire.

FOR THOUGHT: What is the contrast under consideration in Hebrews 12:22-24?
Who, what was under a death sentence in Egypt if the Passover blood was not applied?
How does the ancient order of the Aaronic priesthood extend to us today?

Who is our eternal high priest?

If it was not safe to ignore instructions about the Passover blood, how is it not safe to ignore the instructions of our high priest?

TILL THE UNITY OF THE FAITH

When Jesus ascended into heaven, He, among other things, gave gifts unto men. What were those gifts, and why did He give them? Ephesians 4:11 names the gifts as apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers, or what appears to be teaching pastors. These were not callings in the strictest sense, but outright, direct gifts. These people were instantly empowered with knowledge and ability to operate in these fields of endeavor.

The question then arises as to why Jesus did this? Again, Ephesians 4:12 plainly states these gifts were given specifically for the perfecting (completeness of knowledge and understanding) of the saints, the work of the ministry, and for the edifying of the body of Christ (His church).

The duration of these gifts was to be until the achievement of unity of understanding the faith once delivered to the saints; unity of knowledge of Jesus; to the status of a perfect (complete, whole, not fragmented) man, even to the measure of the stature of the fullness of the anointed. Ephesians 4:13, Eph. 1:23.

Stated reasons for the need to achieve these goals quickly are that the church should no longer be spiritual children, subject to the wiles of the devil, and cunning craftiness of evil men, but to speak the truth in love, growing up into Him (Christ) in all things. Eph. 4:14.

Such gifts continued throughout the apostolic age but ceased with the canonization of the scriptures. Today, God still blesses His churches with teaching pastors and evangelists. There are no prophets, and there are no apostles. This fact underscores the cessation of these things as gifts. Although, the work of bringing God's people to a state of spiritual maturity continues with every generation, the unity of the faith was achieved a very long time ago. By this the Lord's churches have been enabled to survive the onslaughts of the age and still do good business for Him. Moreover, pastoral and evangelistic desires in men and their positive responses continue, but such are not gifts. They are callings for which those called must spend much time in preparation. This enables them to walk worthy of the vocation with which they are called. I understand this to be true to the scriptures.

FOR THOUGHT: Why do you think the faith of Christ is referenced in Jude 3 as once delivered to the saints? Does that indicate completion of the faith?

Since Baptist churches have been settled since apostolic times on the core doctrines of the Bible, is that not a fulfillment of Ephesians 4:12?

If these things are not so, think about and discuss what the perfecting of the saints may mean.

TO WHAT (WHERE) WE ARE COME

“But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel.” Heb 12:22-24.

These few lines center on the contrast between the law and the church, as expressed by “church of the firstborn.” The Old Testament world of shadows and symbols and the New Testament world of realities match in a most thrilling way.

It begins in the Hebrews’ exodus from Egypt. God purchased to Himself the firstborn by the blood of the Passover Lamb. This act emphatically proclaimed to the Hebrews that the first fruits of man, beast, the field, etc. belonged to Him, and such must be yielded to Him or redeemed with fair price. A census was taken, and the tribe of Levi almost perfectly matched in number the total of firstborn saved from death by the blood, whereupon God traded the firstborn back to the Hebrews for the entire tribe of Levi, who would produce the priests and minister about holy things. It is important to connect the dots here. The Old Testament priests became representative of the firstborn ones whom God redeemed for Himself and symbolic of the church to which we have come.

The Levitical priesthood was destined to cease, however. Another high priest, after the order of Melchizedek, would serve the covenant people of God without end. This priest, of course, is Jesus, who is THE FIRST BORN from the dead among many brethren.

When the new high priest fulfilled every jot and title of the Mosaic Law, He redeemed his people of covenant out from under the old and into the new, the expression of the New Covenant among men is the New Testament church, the pillar and ground of the truth, purchased with His own blood. Soon after Pentecost, gentiles were added. The church grew by leaps and bounds under its missionary efforts. People of this New Covenant are called the “Israel of God,” Gal. 6:16. Moreover, Peter calls them “a royal priesthood.” I Peter 2:9.

Consequently, the emphasis is that we are no longer under the law. We have not come to Mt. Sinai, but to Mt. Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem . . . to the church of the firstborn . . . while we have this blessed status and enjoy the understanding and spiritual maturity it affords us, there is much greater personal responsibility regarding submission to the instructions of Christ Jesus, our eternal high priest. We must not turn away from Him who has spoken to us. We must learn to worship and serve God acceptably. While it is sweet to enjoy our relationship with Him as our Loving Heavenly Father, we must hear the other verses as well, and know that our God is indeed a consuming fire.

The church of the firstborn! A lofty position, place, covenant, to which we have been elevated in Christ Jesus.

FOR THOUGHT: What is the contrast under consideration in Hebrews 12:22-24?

Who, and what, was under a death sentence in Egypt if the Passover blood was not applied?

How does the ancient order of the Aaronic priesthood extend to us today?

Who is our eternal high priest?

If it was not safe to ignore instructions about the Passover blood, how is it not safe to ignore the instructions of our high priest?

UNCERTAINTY IN WITNESSING ELIMINATED

Many Christians fail to spread the joy of their faith due to uncertainty about their ability to do so effectively. That can, and should be, eliminated. Here are some helpful suggestions to make that a reality. Think with me!

First, get approved! 2 Timothy 2:15 emphasizes the need to study in order to be approved of God as a workman who is skillful in rightly dividing the Word of truth. Second, pray about it. Ask God to lead you into the life of someone who is ready to hear you. Those who ask are those who receive. Third, be forceful and sure in relating the scriptures, but do not be the proverbial “bull in a china shop!” Let any offense be the offense of the Cross!

Through it all, let love reign. People easily sense if someone genuinely cares about them, or if they are out on a “sales” mission. Leave church out of it, initially. Folks do not say it, but they want to know if you are interested in them or if you have an ulterior motive of selling church membership. Most of all, do it again and again, regardless of any one specific outcome. There is nothing like experience, even unpleasant ones, to prepare the Christian worker to do a better job. Who has not had an occasional door-slamming shut out? Certainly, Jesus did... often.

E. W. Pletcher, in Oklahoma, sometimes lectured to the ministerial students in Bible college. He had become fairly wealthy, beginning as a door-to-door salesman of memberships in an auto club, and parlaying his earnings into real estate. His testimony is that he rejoiced every time a door was slammed in his face. Instead of walking away dejected and sad, he whistled a tune because he had already figured it out, he would make one sale for every seven homes visited. A door slammer simply meant he now had only six more homes to visit to make a sale. What a positive attitude! It worked for him. In like manner, the Christian who labors and prays to win souls will find sweet success, but most often not in the first trial of witnessing. Perhaps it will not be found in the second or third, but it will be found! The Bible promise is wonderfully stated in Psalm 126:6, *“He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.”*

If the conditions of this verse of scripture are met, the harvest it promises will indeed be sure! Moreover, in the process, uncertainty in witnessing will be eliminated.

FOR THOUGHT: What do you think to be the chief hindrance to personal witnessing?

Do you believe complete, expert knowledge of the Bible give immediate boldness to witness?

If experience plays a major role in delivering a good witness, will it be built upon bad as well as good witness sessions?

Think about positive attitude alone, then think about positive attitude backed by personal prayer.

UNDERSTANDING KNOWLEDGE

“Understanding!” What a beautiful word with a beautiful meaning. The first usage of the word does not by any means indicate the first time anyone had it, but it is interesting that it is first found in Exodus 21:3, *“And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, see, I have called by name Bezaleel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah: and I have filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship.”* The three intellectual properties are mentioned in the same verse, wisdom, understanding, and knowledge. Moreover, the same short verse underscores the source of such desired intellectual properties, the Spirit of God!

Doubtless, one who is wise will have acquired much knowledge and understand what he knows. However, the case with many is that they may have acquired much knowledge, but do not understand or fully comprehend the ramifications of what they know, vastly limiting, if not negating, wisdom. Paul mentioned this about some people in his writings to Timothy I Tim. 1:7, *“Desiring to be teachers of the law; understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm.”* Therefore, a considerable amount of Holy Writ is designed to address that problem.

A few verses are herewith referenced to this point, of how understanding is acquired. Witness Proverbs 15:32, *“He that refuseth instruction despiseth his own soul: but he that heareth reproof getteth understanding.”* *“Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore, get wisdom: and with all thy getting, get understanding.”* Prov. 4:7. Again, how is this acquired? *“Through thy precepts I get understanding...”* Psalm 119:104.

Paul admonished the church at Ephesus, *“Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is.”* Eph. 5:17. He prayed for the church at Colosse that they might *“. . . be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding.”* Col. 1:9.

So, the point is made repeatedly. Understanding is predicated on knowledge, and it is the pillar of wisdom. All three of these things are given of God to those who seek Him and allow the precious Word to be transferred from the written page to the mind and heart. James put it this way, *“If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.”* James 1:5.

FOR THOUGHT: How and where may one acquire knowledge, understanding, and wisdom? How do you perceive the interaction of knowledge, understanding and wisdom? Do you think the intellectual requisite mentioned in this article are reserved for the aged disciples? Why?

UNDERSTANDING LEADERSHIP

“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.” Acts 20:28.

“What the world needs is fewer chiefs, and a lot more Indians.” This, and similar statements often heard in politics and businesses, also applies to churches. The connotation of the statement indicates that a lot of chiefs, regardless of the environment, have created inept, bad, or unknowledgeable leadership. “Would be” chiefs do well to work at becoming good followers rather than the type of leader looked upon as inept.

There is often a heavy responsibility in leadership. Unwise people often look at the few perks or the perceived popularity of leadership, and aspire to that position, not understanding the awesome responsibility of knowledge, skill, and wisdom involved behind the scenes. This is especially true of ministry. Many seminary students wash out after the first year (if not sooner) as they come face to face with the austere lifestyle, demands of various, necessary disciplines, and the mundane duties often involved, (where did the glory go?) .

Often, leadership involves more encouragement to others than telling them what to do. Let this idea be illustrated by a high school football team and a young man named Mike, who was mentally challenged, but desperately wanted to be a part of it. Though he made many requests to be sent in to play they were all denied. Still, he hung on. One time the team was being beaten so badly, the coach thought it would make no difference anyway, so he sent him in. As the team huddled, the young man looked at the large linemen and said, “Fellows, if I had your size and strength, I would cream that team. You guys can do it, I know you, and I know you can!” He said to the receivers, “I know how fast you can run. You can outrun me any day, and I know you can outrun those defenders.” He said to the quarterback, “You are the best passer on the field. You can hit your receivers. I know you can. I have watched you. If I were as good as you, we would turn this game around.” His words built a fire in the team. They not only began to score they actually won the game. As the coach asked various team members what happened, they all replied, “It was Mike! He is an inspiration and a leader!”

Great leaders have succeeded in their role by going beyond the essential field of knowledge. Their inspiration and personal encouragement have often made the difference between success and failure.

The good news is we may all be successful leaders in the Lord’s work by being good followers of God’s directive and encouraging Word. It is not so much “follow me” as it is “follow me as I follow the Lord.” This was Paul’s appeal, and he, by the grace of God, made that “followership” become great leadership. Following his example makes all of us Indians to become bona fide chiefs!

FOR THOUGHT: How important do you think it is to notice the strong points of others and to encourage them?

Do you think one may be a good leader who cannot be a good follower? Why?

What do you want to see most in a spiritual leader? Why?

UNDERSTANDING “SERVE”

No language on earth other than English provides such multiple uses of the same terms to mean so many different things . A number of illustrations could be easily cited, but the focus of this article is on the term “serve.” Please think with me for a moment as the term relates to human relationship with the Creator.

In the ancient Hebrew language, the term most used is “Abad.” It first appears in Genesis 15:13, as God told Abraham that his posterity would sojourn in a strange land and serve them. Later, God used this term when telling Moses that he was to bring the Hebrews out of Egypt to this mountain where they would serve Him. This Hebrew word “serve” (Abad) is used some 290 times in the Old Testament and 227 of those times it is translated “serve.” Other translations include “labor,” “work,” “do,” etc., as contextual environment would seem to dictate.

In the New Testament Greek, the term is “Latreuo.” Jesus used this term in Matthew 4:10 while rebuking the devil and affirming that it is written that one is to serve God only. The basic meaning of this Greek term in secular thought references one who is hired. The indication is a contractual agreement in which the one hired carries out the expressed will of the employer. In the context of religious service, it means to worship, perform such prescribed services, rituals, duties, gifts, etc.as divinely given, and that in subjugated obedience.

So how do these definitions of ancient terms play out in modern mindsets? Often, “serve God” is used to identify actions actually contrary to the scriptures. It is heard that one serves God even though the service alluded to is participating in heretical religious ceremonies, and sometimes teaching things easily shown to be blatantly unscriptural. Perhaps closer to home, people actually claim to serve God through their own conjured ideas of what they consider “nice.” If I do what I consider to be nice things for my neighbor who has not asked me to do so, then claim that I am serving him, the reality is that I am serving myself in hopes my neighbor will acknowledge an assessment of my actions that matches my own. So, who is in control here, my neighbor or myself? In Bible terms, that is called iniquity. People are not big enough to sit in God’s chair, so they should abandon the notion in favor of seeking to understand God’s instruction and praying for grace to carry them out. In beliefs and in actions, God’s people are to worship Him exclusively as He expressly desires and accepts such acts of worship. So, be certain that your service is not man’s way, but God’s way. This means the Bible must be accepted as the final authority in doctrine and practice, which it will be eternally.

FOR THOUGHT: May beliefs and activities not sanctioned by the Bible count as a service to God?

Why do men’s idea of service to God and God’s Word often conflict?

On what basis may one think that God will accept unauthorized activity as service to Him?

Why do well-meaning people take unwarranted liberties in “service to God?”

UNEQUALLY YOKED A NO—NO!

In the Old Testament Law, a number of commandments were written that cause modern men to scratch their head. However, they make perfect sense when considering that those things were types and shadows of the will of God for His people in New Testament times. Consider with me one such instance.

Deuteronomy 22:10 commands, *“Thou shalt not plow with an ox and an ass together.”* This is not an uncommon occurrence in third world countries presently. Does God pity the ox or ass for enduring unequal yokefellow or is it said for our sakes. Perhaps a better understanding of it is revealed in specific New Testament passages such as 2 Corinthians 6:14, “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: . . .” This is usually taught to mean that believers should not be married to unbelievers (which is a good thing) but doubtless greater applications are intended, as is clarified in 1 Cor. 7:12-13. The marriage yoke should not be broken if all else is compatible.

What is specifically meant is written in terms that need not be misunderstood. The context of the verse is a message to the church of the Living God at Corinth. It is to be interpreted in that specific context. Believers in the faith once delivered to the saints are not to be yoked together with those who not only fail to believe said faith, but vehemently reject many of the tenets of it. In short, true New Testament churches should not be co-laborers with those of unlike faith, for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness or what communion does light have with darkness? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? (2 Cor. 6:14-16 paraphrased.)

Baptist churches are NOT Protestant churches. They have never been associated with Rome, nor will they ever be. But they can go astray, as did the small group of them that created the Roman Catholic church, by preferring to be married to the Roman Empire than to be separated to the Lord Jesus Christ.

True churches stand or fall in relationship to their creator and founder by how they embrace or lay aside the tenets of the faith once delivered to the saints. One of the quickest ways to fall is to esteem that faith of little value or as see it as a roadblock to progress with other religious organizations in the community which are diverse to them.

Returning to 2 Cor. 6, the conclusion is inescapable. God says, *“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.”* May two walk together in disagreement? To disregard God’s Word for the fellowship of others who disregard it, is to fly in the face of the Creator! To submit to an unequal yoke is a NO –NO!

FOR THOUGHT: Do you think this article fairly represents the meaning of 2 Cor. 6:14? Why? Do churches have license to alter, or pick and choose the part of the Bible they will follow? Do you think God will judge His people with unstated leniency or in strict accord with His Word? If Christians are commanded to not love the world, what would be the basis of fellowship with God if we do love the world?

UNFEIGNED LOVE

“Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently:” I Peter 1:22.

The adjective “unfeigned” is used to describe love two times in the New Testament. It is an interesting and powerful word. Think with me for a minute about it.

In I Peter 1:22 it is used to describe love for the brethren, which is acquired in obedience to the truth through the Spirit. In 2 Cor. 6:6, it is used as the apex of spiritual blessings of pureness, knowledge, longsuffering, and kindness that Paul wanted the Corinthians to have lest they had received the grace of God in vain.

“Unfeigned” is the English translation of the ancient Greek term, “Anupokritos” which was understood to be without dissimulation; without hypocrisy; it is the antithesis of using another’s statement as what one has decided for himself. It is to declare the true belief of one’s heart and readiness to stand on that belief. In this there is no pretense.

This raises some serious questions about modern day discipleship as practiced by far too many who claim the title “Christian.” Who cannot easily recall instances where the right thing was done from a grudging attitude? I do not refer to judging the spirit of others, but to recognizing personal shortcomings.

It is easy to feign love; to render lip service when the heart is not in it. Do people actually go to worship services simply because it is time to do so, and not because they love the Lord, His Word, and His brethren enough to look forward with excitement to the marvelous privilege? Are good deeds done because we “have to,” or because we “get to?” Have missionaries, whose hearts are burdened for others so much that they endure deputation to be able to minister to them, been received out of a sense of obligation instead of joyful excitement over the opportunity to share in their ministry? Do teachers approach class time as obligatory rather than a joyful opportunity? When others fall into misfortune, and a call for help is issued, is there thankfulness for the opportunity or resentment that others must now be temporarily depended upon, but the deed is done because it is felt necessary?

Indeed, there are times when God’s people become weary, not of the way, but in the way. Those are times when drawing closer to the teachings of the Lovely Lord Jesus is underscored. Beating an empty bucket discourages both sheep and shepherd. If there is something to share, excitement is there, and those who have whereof to share will be joyfully excited to fulfill an opportunity. How good it is to be in the company of those who love God, His church, and His Word with discernable unfeigned love. Doubtless, this is the love that Jesus had in mind when He indicated that by this all men would know that we are His disciples.

FOR THOUGHT: When was the last time you fulfilled a spiritual opportunity grudgingly? Think about people and things you love completely and without any negative criticism. Do you think lost people may be somewhat justified in viewing church folks as hypocrites? Why? How would you define “unfeigned” love? Is it discernable in you, in your church?

VAIN JANGLING EVIDENCE

"Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned: From which some having swerved have turned aside unto vain jangling;" 1Timothy 1:5-6.

The early church at Ephesus experienced difficulties due to vain janglers. For that reason, the apostle Paul begged Timothy to remain there as he went on carrying the gospel into Macedonia. Read about it in I Timothy chapter one. Vain janglers and their vain jangling has never stopped, but continually increased by egotistical men and women who would be teachers and ministers of things unknown to them. Think about it for a minute.

God gave Paul tremendous success in Ephesus, as many turned away from sorcery and black magic to trust in Jesus. A powerful church established there, played a fundamental role in the initial spread of Christianity around the Mediterranean Sea.

It was here that seven sons of Sceva were beaten by a demon possessed man as they sought to cash in on the marvelous things Paul was doing in the name of the Lord Jesus. It was quickly perceived that being a teacher of Christianity was arresting to the population and elevating to the teacher, especially those who desired the plaudits of men. Read about it in Acts 19. So, it could almost be predicted that egotistical, but unknowledgeable men would seek to enter into the newly perceived arena.

The apostle called them vain janglers, that is, those given to "vain jangling." This usage of the appellation occurs singularly in the Bible in I Timothy 1:6. It comes from the ancient Greek language, and it means to talk without specific aim, just talk. It might be illustrated in English as "blah, blah, blah, blah!" These vain janglers set themselves up as teachers of the law, because they knew little to nothing about the grace of God. Moreover, Paul said that they did not know what they were talking about regarding the law either. (v. 7). They just talked and affirmed what knowledgeable people recognized as nonsense.

So, what was the plan to counteract the nonsense? Paul wanted Timothy to charge some that they teach no other doctrine than that they had received of him. Furthermore, Timothy was to charge the church at Ephesus to not give heed to fables and endless genealogies, etc., that men use to prey on the unlearned, and in which there is no godly edifying in the faith.

The scene under consideration happened a long time ago, but neither Timothy, Paul or anyone else put the vain jangling to a permanent close. Their kind has multiplied exponentially over the last two millennia as Satan works furiously in view of his rushing deadline of activity to turn men from God and His Holy Word. It is chic today for ministers to not say "the Bible says" but to say, "I say unto you." Hummmm! Seems nothing more than ample evidence of a bunch of vain jangling to those who love and wish to be fed with the Word of God!

FOR THOUGHT: Think of an example of vain jangling you have heard recently.
How important is it to you that spiritual teachers present the Bible rather than their thoughts?
Do you think there are modern vain janglers in the world of Christianity?
How do you perceive the work of the seven sons of Sceva in Acts 19?

Pause. Consider. Grow in Faith.



The ordinary moments of life can become invitations to think more deeply about God, His Word, and our response to Him.

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