



*Messages
of*

Truth

Byron Nichols

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Dedication

To my parents,
George and Maudie Nichols,
who successfully instilled in their four sons
a lasting respect and reverence
for God;

To my wife ***Gay,***
whose love and encouragement
continue to be among
my most prized possessions;

And to my daughter ***Jill*** and son ***Scott,***
their spouses, ***Doug*** and ***Jenna,***
and my grandchildren,
Nicole, Spencer, Levi, and Landon,
with my prayer that they will all experience
their greatest earthly joy in serving
our God and His dear Son.

Publisher's Statement

How vividly I remember a day in 1991 when Byron and Gay Nichols visited J.C. and me in Winona. Sitting at our kitchen table, we talked of the mission/printing work in which we were engaged, and Gay asked, "How do you see us fitting into this work?" J.C.'s response was to tell them of the magazine he wanted to begin, offering a range of Bible topics in each issue, suitable for use among Christians in the States but especially needed in foreign countries. The idea appealed to the Nichols, and Byron agreed to be the Managing Editor. Thus began a relationship that has resulted in the printing of 66 volumes of the quarterly magazine, ***The Voice of Truth International***.

Byron and Gay have worked as a team, receiving, editing, and type-setting articles for each issue, as well as raising funds for the printing, servicing the subscription list for individuals and congregations, and doing much of the leg-work in mailing out the magazines. Workers in the office in Winona also participate in the production, doing the lay-out work, raising funds and seeking subscriptions, and mailing out the overseas boxes. Currently, 40,000 copies are printed in English, Stateside, of which 20,000 are sent to 80 countries, free of charge. There is a Spanish edition, and editions are also printed in India in English, Tamil, and Telugu.

Byron's editorials have been outstanding. They deserve ongoing circulation, so we asked him to put together a selection to be printed in book form. The result is **Messages of Truth**. We are very pleased to make these lessons available, and we pray that much eternal good will be accomplished as an ever-expanding number of people have access to them.

Following J.C.'s death in 2008, Byron was invited to become the Editor of ***The Voice of Truth International***. We are deeply appreciative of the good work he and Gay have done through the past nineteen years, and we pray God's continued blessings on them.

Betty (J.C.) Choate
Winona, MS
October 15, 2010

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Messages of Truth

Section One

Truth and Its Proclamation

The Voice of Truth International

There are three major emphases embodied in the name, ***The Voice of Truth International***, and each of these is worthy of our attention and careful contemplation.

The VOICE of Truth International

Truth is a tremendous commodity, but only if it is dispensed and dispersed. Truth loses its benefit if it is just stored up as if it were money in a bank vault. Its value is in its application. Truth must be made known.

The Gospel is the truth of God. From the beginning of the Gospel, there were brave men who quickly came to understand the value of it, so much so that they felt compelled to share that Good News with all who would lend an ear. They knew that *they* had to be the *voice* of the truth, the propellant that would get the message of salvation out. They were able to see that their role was to go and tell the truth.

Paul testified that he and others were bold to be the voice of the Gospel of God even in the midst of great conflict (1 Thessalonians 2:2). He said that he had been able to serve as a voice of the truth even as he encountered significant obstacles. He wrote in Philippians 1:12, *"But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel."* Paul told the elders from Ephesus, *"...I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God"* (Acts 20:24). The truth was given a voice by Paul and others like him.

It is imperative that the Lord's church today accept the responsibility of being God's **voice** of the truth. ***The Voice of Truth International*** is the product of a dedicated effort to publish and proclaim the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Voice of TRUTH International

There has been an increase in the number of people who have somehow concluded that *truth* is flexible, very subjective, and

is definitely situational. What makes this particularly remarkable is the fact that there are even religious leaders who concur with such thinking and apply it even to *truth* as it relates to the Bible.

Just a few of the numerous references in God's Word to the reality of truth and that it can be and is known include John 8:32, John 17:17, and Proverbs 23:23. Additionally, truth and Jesus Christ cannot be separated. John 1:14 states that Jesus (the Word) became flesh and was "*full of grace and truth.*" John then says in verse 17 that "*...grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.*" Of what possible value is any of this if truth is not real and absolute? What does that do to the person of Jesus Christ? He claimed in John 14:6 to be "*the truth.*" If this is not so, then Jesus becomes a liar, an imposter, and a fraud.

The apostle Paul had a deep conviction regarding truth, made quite evident in Galatians 2:5,14 as he refers to "*the truth of the gospel,*" as well as in Galatians 3:1, where he says, "*O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth...?*"

The Voice of Truth International is firmly committed to being a voice of **truth**. We believe wholeheartedly in the plenary verbal inspiration of the Scriptures, meaning that the original manuscripts of the entire Bible were totally inspired, written exactly as God wanted them; they were from the mind of God, not that of man; and they were without error, containing the truth which is certain, unchangeable, and eternal.

The Voice of Truth INTERNATIONAL

This magazine is making a real effort to duplicate the scope of the Gospel itself. Possibly the best-known verse in all the Bible is John 3:16, "*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*" We cannot fail to notice the scope of God's love... "**the world.**" Christ died for all people of every nation who have ever lived or will ever live. This explains why Jesus said to take the Gospel to every creature in every nation (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:46-47). The Gospel of truth is the only remedy

for the spiritual ills of the world. We just have to get His message out. Why? Because Jesus will one day be “...*revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ* (2 Thessalonians 1:7-8).

With the aid of many brethren, *The Voice of Truth International* is indeed **international** in its scope, taking the Gospel of truth into approximately 80 countries of the world.

Where Is The Fire?

Fire is mentioned numerous times in the Bible, but I want to direct our attention to its mention in Jeremiah 20:7-13. In the first chapter of Jeremiah, we find the Lord calling this young man to be His special spokesman. Jeremiah was extremely reluctant, but God persuaded him, assuring him that He would give him the words to say and the strength to say them and to deal with any obstacles that he might encounter. The Lord promised that He would not leave Jeremiah alone in his struggles, but that He would be with him.

By the time we get to chapter 20, we see that Jeremiah had accepted his responsibility, but he had encountered a great deal of opposition, including mockery and ridicule. Undoubtedly God had told him at the beginning about the barriers that would confront him. However, it seems safe to assume from his statements in chapter 20 that Jeremiah had not realized the magnitude of the task that God had given to him. He wanted very much to be the prophet that Jehovah wanted him to be, but his assignment just continued to be a bigger and bigger burden. Finally, beginning in verse 7, he complains bitterly to the Lord, declaring in essence that he absolutely could not go on any further. He was admitting defeat.

Then he stated how he was going to deal with the ordeal (verse 9). Jeremiah stated, “*I will not make mention of Him, nor speak anymore in His name.*” His solution for dealing with his opposition was to just keep his mouth shut. His enemies and detractors would no longer have any reason to be his foes, because he was no

longer going to be a spokesman for Jehovah!

Jeremiah had hardly finished expressing his utter despair in the first part of verse 9 when he followed those words with one of the most remarkable proclamations of conviction and commitment found in the entire Bible! In the second part of the verse, this man of God passionately declared, ***“But His word was in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding it back, and I could not.”*** Somehow Jeremiah had an awakening — his eyes were opened once again to the importance of his message, the only message that would save his people. His renewed realization of this reality revitalized his determination not to forsake his mission. He tells in verses 11 and 12 of his confidence that the Lord will truly work in whatever ways necessary to enable His servant to carry out his assigned task. Jeremiah’s rejuvenated spirit and sense of obligation are a predecessor to the proclamation of Paul when he said, *“For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!”* (1 Corinthians 9:16).

Both of these men of God had a fervor that compelled them to do that which was dictated by God. They felt that they **had** to tell the message that they had received from God. They obviously had a choice — they didn’t really **have** to tell it, but their sense of urgency **compelled** them to get the word out.

In spite of his discouragement and difficulties, Jeremiah felt as if he would “burn up” if he didn’t let the word escape from the innermost part of his being! Would you say that we in the church today have that same feeling within us? While not intending to send us all on a drastic “guilt trip,” surely we would have to agree that Jeremiah’s depth of commitment was superior to that of God’s people today. There is a desperate need for all of God’s children today to experience that same fire within our bones!

What Can Cause this Fire?

Let me conclude with a few suggestions as to what can bring about this burning sensation in our spiritual bones:

1. Realization of what God and Christ have done for us and for the whole world.
2. Heartfelt gratitude for what has been done for us.
3. Realization of the lostness of the world.
4. Caring that the world is lost.
5. Having God's Word in our heart and soul.

Jeremiah came to have a magnificent obsession, one which must be duplicated in the church today if we are to truly be people *"after God's own heart."*

What Should We Preach?

As people belonging to God, having been bought with the blood of His Son, we will undoubtedly want to please and honor Him with our preaching and teaching. The question is — *just what does He want preached?*

In trying to answer this question, I don't want to be guilty of being overly simplistic, but I do believe that there is a very simple answer to this vitally important question. The apostle Paul furnishes the answer:

*"I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom; Preach **the word!** Be ready in season, out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables" (2 Timothy 4:1-4).*

Here we have our answer — **"Preach the Word!"** Almost immediately another question arises — Why preach the Word? There are three good reasons which come to mind at once. (1) Because God said to. That ought to be sufficient by itself, but another very good reason is (2) because the Word is inspired by God, it reveals to some extent the mind of the Lord (2 Timothy 3:16). The other reason that we will mention here is (3) because the Word is

for our benefit (2 Timothy 3:17). The inspired Scriptures have been given to us so that, as men of God, we can be complete, mature, fully developed, *“thoroughly equipped for every good work.”*

People of God must be people of God’s Word. Preachers who faithfully preach the Word help their hearers become able to rightly divide the Word, to handle it properly (2 Timothy 2:15). The Word has the power to mould and shape our lives in such a way that we can be an honor to Him. The Word is able to save our souls (James 1:21). This happens when we become submissive and obedient to the Word as it instructs us.

The Word is what we need to hear, and once we learn to let it govern our lives, we will actually desire to hear the Word, rather than the flowery speeches of men who are willing to compromise themselves and the truth in order to attract and please people.

Why would one who loves God prefer to listen to messages that do not come from the Word, especially when Jesus makes the emphatic point that His words will be the basis for judgment in the last day (John 12:48)? Paul certainly understood the significance of what Jesus said. In Galatians, chapter one, he strongly warned against the preaching of any gospel which was different from what he had been preaching. It isn’t hard at all to determine what he had been preaching. We can read it for ourselves in the book of Acts, and in the New Testament letters which he wrote. He faithfully and consistently preached the Word and *only* the Word! This made it possible for Paul to honestly say to the elders of the church in Ephesus, *“Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you **all the counsel of God**”* (Acts 20:26,27).

Some object, saying that those who emphasize the Word tend to be hard, intolerant, inconsiderate, and unloving. There is absolutely no excuse for abusing the Word (or the hearers) by using it as a club or a weapon with which to hurt people. Nothing could be further from the purpose of God. But, friends, it is very possible to preach the Word in such a way as to be properly described as kind, compassionate, tender, and loving. I know that this is true.

Go with me back to Acts 20 and notice verses 36-38. These men to whom Paul had declared “*all the counsel of God*” were now weeping greatly, falling on his neck and kissing him, and showing their great sorrow after learning that they would apparently never see him again in this life. Through his preaching and his life Paul had shown them that he cared very deeply for them, and that feeling was then returned to him. So it is very possible to boldly “*preach the Word*” and not be unloving, unkind, uncaring. Rather, I believe that truly preaching the Word is indeed being caring, kind, and loving.

Preachers, love the Lord and those to whom you preach enough to “*preach the Word*,” doing so with courage, conviction, and boldness, but always with love (Ephesians 4:15). Elders, insist that nothing but the Word be preached, and see to it that your congregations once again periodically hear sermons on basic, fundamental Bible doctrines. Christians, study the Word, and commend those preachers and elders who are faithful in preaching and standing for the same.

Indoctrination — That’s Our Job

The word “indoctrination” is one which is frequently misunderstood and misused. This word has a bad connotation in the minds of some; they use it in connection with such ideas as brainwashing and coercive action to cause people to accept ideas that they really don’t want to accept. Even in the church there is confusion and misunderstanding regarding this word. In strongly denouncing indoctrination as being wrong, one brother wrote, “Indoctrination eliminates truth, honesty, openness, a search for right, thought, and understanding. The word Indoctrination is not in the Bible! To indoctrinate is to program, to control, to dominate.” If the things that this writer has attributed to indoctrination are accurate, then he is absolutely correct — indoctrination is evil and has no place whatsoever in Christianity. However, please don’t draw your final conclusion just yet.

I would agree that the word “indoctrination” does not appear in the Bible. Hopefully our readers have recognized that a major

thrust of **The Voice Of Truth International** is to point people back to what the Bible, the inspired Word of God, says. However, just because a word does not appear in the Bible does not have to mean that God rejects that word. For example, I don't know of anyone who believes it is wrong to use the word "missionary." Nevertheless, this is a word that has not come to us from the Bible, but men have originated this word to refer to activities and persons that are very biblical in nature. Likewise, the terms "gospel meeting" and "lectureship" are not to be found in the Scriptures but are commonly used in the church and are very biblical in nature. These examples should be sufficient to make our point.

Undoubtedly the writer referred to above is very honest in his thinking, and I'm sure that he is trying to correct something that he believes is wrong. However, it is possible that his definition of "indoctrination" is inaccurate. Since the word is not in the Bible, we must find its definition in a dictionary instead. A review of a variety of English dictionaries indicates that the following definition from *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary Unabridged* is typical: "1. to instruct in doctrines, theories, beliefs, or principles. 2. to instruct; to teach." Some dictionaries do make passing reference to brainwashing, etc.

Granted, by this very definition we can see that indoctrination can be made to be an effort to accomplish something that is bad or unholy. However, I hope that we can see that the broader and much more general meaning of the word simply involves teaching and instructing for the purpose of advancing beliefs or doctrine, either for good or for bad.

With this in mind, it would appear that instead of indoctrination being **wrong**, it is **right**. Not only is it *right*, it is **essential**. Now that does not mean that those who engage in indoctrinating people cannot be guilty of abusive control, restricting the search for what is true and right. That most certainly can and does sometimes happen. We can even be guilty of harmfully indoctrinating when we teach and preach the very Gospel itself. Paul cautions in Ephesians 4:15 that we are to speak the truth "*in love*." Truth can be conveyed

in a loving and compassionate manner, but it can also be conveyed in a manner which is hateful, arrogant, or argumentative.

Moses, at God's direction, told the Israelites, "*And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall **talk** of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up*" (Deuteronomy 6:6,7). This is indoctrination. Moses was saying that parents have an obligation to teach (indoctrinate) their children. He most assuredly did not mean that they are to "brainwash" their children, but he did mean that parents are to train, teach, and persuade their children, and to guide their thinking so as to help them to become faithful followers of God.

The Lord expects the church to be busy indoctrinating. Elders are to be men who are teachers (indoctrinators), (1 Timothy 3:2). Paul told Timothy to commit the things that he had heard (been taught) "*to faithful men who will be able to teach (indoctrinate) others also*" (2 Timothy 2:2). In Hebrews 5:12 we read of some who should have matured to the point of having become teachers (indoctrinators), but rather were still in need of being taught (indoctrinated) themselves.

The Bible makes it very clear that the primary mission of the church is to preach, teach, instruct, and persuade. In other words, the mission of the church is to **indoctrinate** folks as to the Gospel of Christ. Jesus has told us to "*preach the gospel to the whole creation*" (Mark 16:15). Thus, it would be quite accurate to say that Jesus has commanded us to **indoctrinate** the whole world regarding the Gospel.

Truth Has No Voice Of Its Own

There is great value in truth. Surely truth is one of the greatest commodities in the world. Truth is so very important that Jesus identified Himself as the personification of it. The Lord said in John 14:6, "*I am the way, **the truth**, and the life; no one cometh unto the Father, but by me.*"

Solomon's wisdom led him to recognize the value of truth. He admonished, "*Buy the truth, and sell it not...*" (Proverbs 23:23). In spite of its remarkable value, truth becomes of no effect if it is not made known. Truth cannot speak for itself, it cannot speak in its own behalf, it cannot tell what it wants said, it cannot make itself known — it is dependent upon us to do these things for it.

"*And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free*" (John 8:32). Notice that Jesus here said that freedom results from truth. Freedom is exceedingly important to every person in the whole world; thus truth is of the greatest importance.

The church has been charged with the responsibility of revealing the truth to others. Jesus commissioned us to preach the Gospel (the Truth) to the whole creation, making disciples and baptizing people in all nations (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15,16). Jesus implored the Father in behalf of His disciples, "*Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth*" (John 17:17). If people are to be sanctified by the truth, God's Word, they must become aware of the truth. The truth must be given a voice, and Christians are that voice.

In Ephesians 1:13 Paul calls that word of truth "*the gospel of your salvation.*" Without having heard the word of truth, those Ephesian Christians would not have had an opportunity for salvation. Christians are Christians because they have learned and obeyed the truth. Those who are not Christians are not Christians because they either have not had the truth made known to them, or they have rejected the truth.

David declared that he had not selfishly hidden God's truth, but he had made that truth known (Psalm 40:7-10). Can we, as God's children today, do anything less than that? Dare we allow God's truth to lie silently hidden in our church buildings, or even in our hearts, while the world plunges headlong into eternity without a saving knowledge of that truth? We **must** become truth's voice.

There is a growing number of people who believe that there is no such thing as truth that is absolute and unchanging. It is bewildering to think that such could possibly be the case, but there are even folks within the church who have yielded to this erroneous

thinking. It is astounding to think that anyone who says he believes in God and believes the Bible could also believe that truth changes, that we really cannot **know** anything. The reason that this is so astounding is the fact that the Bible uses the word “know” and its related word forms literally hundreds of times. If truth is not absolute, if we cannot really know anything, surely we must totally reject the Bible, because it continually affirms that we can know many things, and that truth is absolute and unchanging.

Christians must stand for truth. We must be the voice of truth. We must be willing to live up to our commitment to stand with Jesus. Remember, He said that we are either **for** Him or **against** Him (Matthew 12:30). Someone has said, “He who stands for nothing will fall for anything.” Surely that statement has some validity. It is our responsibility to stand with and for Jesus and truth.

While it is true that every Christian is required to stand for and speak up for truth, this is especially so in the case of those who serve as elders in the church. God’s people are facing greater struggles today than ever before in the entire lifetime of nearly all in the church. Please understand very clearly — the situation is not hopeless. However, the welfare of the church depends largely upon those who are the elders, bishops, pastors, overseers. God’s inspired Word has charged each of these men with the responsibility of “*holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and to convict those who contradict*” (Titus 1:9). Elders, please lead us by your example in standing for truth and against error. Please lead us in being the voice of truth. Please also lead us in doing these things “*in love*” (Ephesians 4:15).

As great as truth is, *it cannot speak for itself*. Truth can save, *but only if it is proclaimed by people*. As God’s children, we possess tremendous power — we possess the truth of God. However, we can diminish the power of the truth by not sharing it and declaring it. What a tragedy it will be if we do not become the voice of truth so that souls for whom Christ died can be saved!



Messages of Truth

Section Two

Truth About God

“God Said It . . . That Settles It”

I’m sorry that I don’t know who deserves the credit for having first stated this, but someone made the declaration, **“God said it, I believe it, and that settles it.”** To those who accept the deity of God and believe Him to be the creator of the universe, etc., these words comprise a wonderful statement of faith and commitment. I’m thankful that this affirmation of trust in God has been passed on so that many can benefit from it.

It may well be that this emphatic assertion was originally intended strictly as a personal statement of belief, and nothing else. Believing this to very likely be the case, surely these words serve to encourage all believers in God to likewise remain firm in their individual conviction that God is all the Bible declares Him to be, and that God only has to say a thing for it to be so. We can say, right along with that one who first uttered these words, that our faith doesn’t depend on the faith of others; ours is a very personal and singular conviction. Since our God has shown Himself to be faithful in all things, we can confidently place our eternal destiny in His hands. May every child of God both declare and demonstrate consistently this degree of trust in God and subjection to Him.

While still being fully persuaded of the significance of the statement, I would like to take you with me on a detour from the original wording. As it stands, the statement is indeed powerful, but I would like for us to consider the power and truthfulness of an abbreviated form of it. I believe that there is a great need for us to accept the validity of the statement even without the middle part, “I believe it.” Without intending to be the least bit flippant or frivolous, let it be said that in one very real sense of the word, it doesn’t matter whether I believe it or not — if God said it, that settles it! With this truth in mind, and with the middle part of the statement having been omitted, let’s consider this revised version of the statement.

“God said it, and that settles it.” Sometimes folks want to talk about “core beliefs.” I would nominate this shortened statement as qualifying as a core belief if ever there was such a thing. Whether *we believe* what God has said has absolutely no bearing on His authority, His sovereignty, or power. Our belief of what He has said is pertinent and important only in terms of our individual salvation from sin. God is not in any way dependent upon our endorsement in order for His statements to be valid. He needs no character witnesses. He needs no eye-witnesses. He needs no votes. The Lord is undoubtedly pleased to have whatever support is made available to Him, but neither the presence nor lack of it is relevant with regard to His greatness and authority. He will remain in charge whether we salute Him or not.

There are some necessary prerequisites for being able to acknowledge and subscribe to the truth that if God said it, that settles it;

- **Humility.** We cannot abide by this truth without first humbling ourselves as Jesus instructed in the Beatitudes, “*Blessed are the poor in spirit...*” (Matthew 5:3).
- **Submissive attitude.** Our humility must be so deep that it leads us to a willingness to say with Samuel of old, “*Speak, Lord, for Your servant hears*” (1 Samuel 3:9,10).
- **Recognition of God’s sovereignty and power.** David acknowledged before the congregation of Israel the utter supremacy and power of God. To the Lord he said, “*Blessed are You, Lord God of Israel, our Father; forever and ever. Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, the power and the glory, the victory and the majesty; for all that is in heaven and in earth is Yours; Yours in the kingdom, O Lord, and You are exalted as head over all. Both riches and honor come from You, and You reign over all. In Your hand is power and might; in Your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all*” (1 Chronicles 29: 10-12).
- **Gratitude.** A sincere gratitude will make many things much easier, including being submissive. A lack of deep gratitude makes such activity impossible.

- **Desire to reciprocate His love.** Love extended by God to us can never really be repaid, but we most surely can and must demonstrate our loving gratitude by our desire and determination to accept whatever He says as being true, and right, and for our eternal welfare.

The only way that we can truly honor God, and thus to ultimately be saved, is by sincerely adopting and adhering to the proposition, **“God said it, and that settles it!”**

Is Everything That Happens Meant To Happen?

More and more people, including Christians, are expressing their belief that “everything that happens, happens for a reason,” or “everything that happens is meant to happen.”

Without any desire to be unfair or to misrepresent what others believe when they say that they believe that “everything that happens is meant to happen,” please consider the suggestion that there needs to be some careful consideration given to the implications of these beliefs and where those beliefs logically lead. No doubt most who accept this idea do not subscribe to all of these implications, but where can the line be drawn, and on what grounds?

Fatalism

There is a doctrine called “fatalism,” and it is defined as “the doctrine that all things are determined by fate, or take place by inevitable necessity; a disposition to accept everything as inevitable and predetermined by fate.” This is basically what is involved in the idea that everything happens because it was meant to happen.

Those of us who believe that God is all-powerful and is in control of the universe should have some difficulty in accepting the idea that everything happens because it is meant to happen. Who or what causes everything to happen? Does God do this? If so, this puts God in a position of being responsible for all sins, all tragedies, all troubles, everything that happens. Can this possibly be true?

Sin happens. Surely God does not cause sin to happen. The sins of mankind brought about the death of God's only beloved Son — please don't say that God caused that death to take place because He caused the sins to be committed. Terrible calamities occur, such as hurricanes, floods, fires, etc. that destroy many lives, and often some or all of the lives lost are people who have not yet heard the message of eternal salvation that has originated with God. Does God cause people to die in their sins? How can we believe the Bible when it tells us that God is love and that He loves everyone and wants all to be freed from their sins, and then at the same time believe that God is the cause responsible for the destruction of some of the very folks for whom Jesus died?

If everything happens for a purpose, surely we are all then but powerless pawns on God's great gameboard of life. Surely there is a better answer than this. God didn't create robots — He created intelligent humans in His likeness.

The Providence of God

Oh, yes, we believe in God's providence, but His providing for us is far different from His causing us to do what we do. In the beginning God put His created humans, Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden, with the ability to discern right from wrong, but also with the freedom or ability to choose right or wrong. As a result, Eve's sin was her sin, not action forced upon her by God. Cain did not kill Abel because that was "meant to be" — he killed him because of his own disobedience.

Please take the time to review the following verses of Scripture which are related to this topic: Romans 8:28; 2 Corinthians 5:10-11; Colossians 3:23; Isaiah 59:1-2; and Hebrews 5:8-9. These verses are very important. They deserve your thoughtful attention before you read further in this article.

For Your Consideration

God is powerful, but Satan is also powerful, having been allowed to be so by God. Satan is definitely responsible for much of what happens in this world.

Temptations happen in the lives of everyone, but God does not tempt anyone (James 1:13-15). Furthermore, God provides a way of escape from every temptation that does come along (1 Corinthians 10:13).

If everything happens for a purpose, what is the purpose for such things as these:

- ◆ A terrible earthquake that destroys so much property and takes a great many lives?
- ◆ A small child being raped by someone who has no concern for anyone or any thing?
- ◆ An elderly man or woman who is beaten or killed by a teenager on drugs or alcohol?
- ◆ A husband and father who loses his job, and thus his ability to provide for his family?
- ◆ Sin in general?

This list could go on and on.

Question: If this belief is accurate, why make an effort to accomplish anything or do what is right? Things will happen a certain way regardless. Also, why pray? It won't change things, according to this idea. However, James 5:16 says that "*The effective fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.*"

Good things may very well result from bad events, but that is more attributable to God's providence than to God's causing the bad events to take place. May we not carelessly put God in a position of blame for things that He ALLOWS to happen, but does not CAUSE to happen.

The Wisdom and Knowledge of God

While we highly respect the entire Bible, most of us have very special feelings regarding certain passages of Scripture. We can't help but have our favorite verses, chapters, etc. My mother's favorite passage was Romans 11:33-36. These verses also constitute my favorite group of verses. Here Paul praises God in this manner:

“O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord?’ (Isaiah 40:13) Or who has become His counselor?’ (Job 36:22) ‘Or who has first given to Him, and it shall be repaid to him?’ (Job 41:11) For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory for ever. Amen.”

Dear readers, we are about to try to come to a better understanding and appreciation of one of the most majestic and marvelous groups of verses of all of God’s inspired Word!

We may stand in awe of the wealth of Bill Gates, the world’s richest man, but the many billions of dollars of the head of the Microsoft Corporation still leave this man as a pauper in comparison with the riches of God. Our God owns all of the material wealth of the universe, including that of Bill Gates. However, some of the very greatest riches belonging to God are in the realm of wisdom and knowledge. The inspired testimony of Paul was that *“the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men”* (1 Corinthians 1:25). Please understand that Paul was not saying that God has ever acted foolishly or demonstrated any weakness whatsoever. Rather, this was just a way to emphasize the tremendous superiority of God’s wisdom over that of mere man. The Holy Spirit led David to put it this way: *“Great is our Lord and mighty in power; His understanding is infinite”* (Psalm 147:5).

Moffatt’s translation of verse 33 in our text may well help us to see the magnitude of God’s knowledge: *“What a fathomless depth lies in the wisdom and knowledge of God! How inscrutable His judgments! How mysterious His methods!”*

Surely it is true that we may know the mind of God only to the extent that He chooses to reveal it to man. Who could possibly ever advise God on any subject? Job certainly could not, and both Isaiah and Jeremiah join Paul in affirming that no man can (Isaiah 40:13,14; Jeremiah 23:18).

God gives to all, but He receives from none. What could man possibly give to God, in view of the fact that God created the

entire world and continues to be the owner of it all? We have absolutely nothing to give to Him so that He then would be in a position of needing to repay or reimburse us. But some may object by referring us to Paul's admonition in the first part of the next chapter in Romans (12:1,2) to give our lives to God. Indeed, we are to give our lives to God in sacrificial service to Him! However, even in presenting our very lives to God, He in no way becomes indebted to us. Our lives can never be so good as to cause Him to owe us anything. We will forever be indebted to Him, never the other way around!

Goodspeed translated verse 36 like this: "*For from Him everything comes; through Him everything exists; and in Him everything ends!*" In this verse Paul sums up his beautiful and heartfelt doxology. Like Paul, we need to recognize and acknowledge the greatness and majesty of our God and join together in affirming that God and God alone is deserving of our everlasting homage and adoration and praise.

May we duplicate Job's attitude toward God. Even in the midst of his questioning of God, Job declared, "*Though He slay me, I will hope in Him*" (Job 13:15). Surely our confidence, our faith, our trust, and our hope must and can rest in God!

Please consider this beautiful poem by a dear Christian lady who expressed her love and admiration for the Lord in these words:

This Lovely Earth

When I behold this lovely earth
And think of its wonderful birth-
How God, by His great might and power
Brought forth each tree, each lovely flower –
I bow in humble adoration
Before the God of creation.
My heart overflows with joy and love.
Glory to our God above!

He made the sun that shines so bright,
The moon, the stars to rule the night –
Created all things, great and small-

Our great God created them all.
Angels in heaven prostate fall,
Humbly obedient to His call.
O mortal men on this old earth,
Praise Jehovah! He gave thee birth!

Our God devised redemption's plan
For every tribe, for every man.
Dear sinner, your poor soul to save
Christ conquered death, hell, and the grave.
O come, make hallelujahs ring!
Raise your voices! His praises sing!
Praise Him from whom all blessings flow!
Praise Him all creatures here below!

Anna Davis

Things Man Can Do That God Cannot Do

In reflecting upon God and His great power, we think of the words of Jehovah about Himself as He asked the rhetorical question in Genesis 18:14, “*Is anything too hard for the Lord?*” Just a very brief review of the Scriptures causes us to conclude with conviction, “No, nothing is too hard for the Lord!”

The angel Gabriel stated to Mary, “*For with God nothing will be impossible*” (Luke 1:37). Jesus Himself later declared in Matthew 19:26, “*With God all things are possible.*”

With all of this in mind, it hardly seems mentionable that we could actually affirm that there could possibly be anything that man is capable of doing that God, man's creator, is incapable of doing — yet it is so.

Jesus taught that we ought to pray that we not be led into temptation (Matthew 6:9). As human beings, we are very susceptible to temptation. However, God is not even able to be tempted. Satan is exceedingly powerful, but he cannot tempt God. In James 1:13,

James says, “*God cannot be tempted by evil...*” In His human experience, even Jesus was tempted. The writer of Hebrews says that Jesus “*was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.*” Not so with the Father. Temptation is not even a possibility with Him.

Lying is common to a great many men, but the Bible records Paul’s declaration that “*God cannot lie*” (Titus 1:2). Because He created us as free moral agents, God has made it possible for us to do what He in His complete purity cannot do. He has not, will not, and cannot ever tell a lie!

Unfortunately, it is quite clear that man is capable of committing every sin in the book. Sin became so rampant that God was very sad that He even brought man into existence (Genesis 6:5-7). But God cannot sin. Sin results from giving in to the devil’s temptations (James 1:12-15). We have already seen that God cannot be tempted, so it is utterly impossible for God to sin.

Man is definitely adept at showing partiality. While many engage in showing partiality to certain ones over others, most everyone deplores such actions. We cry out for fairness and impartiality, but it is hard to find. It is a different story with God, though. He accepts whoever fears Him and works righteousness (Acts 10:34,35). In Romans 2:11 Paul strongly affirmed that “*there is no partiality with God.*” Peter declared that God shows absolutely no favoritism as He judges each person strictly on the basis of his or her own work (1 Peter 1:17).

We are all painfully familiar with the fact that mankind is capable of dying. God planned it this way. Hebrews 9:27 tells us that each one of us has an inescapable appointment with death (unless Jesus returns beforehand). God, however, is not subject to death — He had no beginning and will have no ending. He is eternal. He was already in existence when “*the beginning*” took place (Genesis 1:1). In Psalm 90:2 David expressed the fact that God is “*from everlasting to everlasting.*” Paul declared that God is eternal and immortal (1 Timothy 1:17). This means that God is not subject to dying. He cannot die. Oh yes, several years ago it was proclaimed that “God is dead!” The fact is that God had not even had a sick spell, let alone

experienced death. Not only can God not die, He can't even get older.

Let me mention here another of God's self-imposed limitations that I believe needs our attention. God cannot make something that has already happened not to have happened. An understanding of this fact will change some of our prayers. God has chosen to be unable to erase history. For example, He cannot give an affirmative answer to a congregational prayer that says, "Lord, we pray that we have all assembled today for the right purpose." Friends, God cannot do anything about that prayer. The purpose for assembling is past history, it cannot be undone. The purpose for future assemblies can be changed, but not any in the past. Likewise, a prayer at the close of a worship service praying that we have worshipped in spirit and in truth cannot be granted by God. The worship has already occurred, and it either was or was not acceptable at that time. It cannot be erased or deleted. God can erase the guilt of our sins of the past, but He cannot erase the actions themselves. They will continue to stand as a part of history.

We need to recognize and acknowledge God's limitations. They exist because He has imposed them upon Himself through His complete holiness and righteousness. In contrast, man is limited in what he can do and be because of his lack of holiness and righteousness.

God Is in Control

Good people talk about conditions and circumstances in the world and say, "God is in control," implying that everything that is occurring is according to God's will and plan.

Surely all who believe in God believe that He is indeed in control of the world. However, we cannot accept the idea that God's being in control means that He causes, wants, or is pleased with everything that happens. If so, everyone is merely a robot, having no choice or power of self-will.

If His being in control means that God causes everything to happen that happens, then God causes all sins to be committed, He

caused Judas to betray Christ, Moses to strike the rock and thus be unable to enter the promised land of Canaan, Adam and Eve to sin and be expelled from Eden, Nadab and Abihu to offer strange fire, etc., etc., etc.

Romans 8:28 tells us that God can and does make good results come out of bad circumstances, but it doesn't say that He causes the bad circumstances. God was in control in the life of Joseph so that the evil things done to him ultimately led to his being in a position of tremendous power and influence (Genesis 37-47), but God's control did not cause the evil.

Surely we don't believe that God actually desires that thousands die and many more suffer greatly in other ways as a direct result of war today, yet we can most assuredly believe that He sometimes uses His people to render special service in His name as a result of wars. For example, the greatest mission activity on the part of the church in modern times came about as a result of Christians serving in the military in World War II and seeing firsthand the tremendous spiritual needs of people ravaged by war.

Is it possible that we would feel guilty for thinking that God is not directly controlling everything that takes place in His universe? Would that make Him to be less than all powerful? Friends, the owner of any large company will most certainly delegate much authority and responsibility to others beneath him, but that owner still maintains the power to alter any decision implemented by any of his subordinates. God has chosen to work in somewhat the same way. He has delegated control of nations to kings, presidents, parliaments, etc., but they are all His subordinates, although few of them seem to realize that fact.

If God is directly in control of everything, why pray to Him in behalf of that which is good and of those in high places in government, etc.? Would not such prayers be useless, since God would already have things going the way He wanted them? Praying to God and asking Him to change anything would be futile. Yet, He makes it quite clear in the Scriptures that He wants His people to pray — Luke 18:1 (we ought always to pray); Colossians 4:2 (continue

in prayer); Philippians 4:6 (let requests be made known to God); 1 Thessalonians 5:17 (pray without ceasing); James 5:16 (the earnest prayer of a righteous man avails much). Furthermore, God has promised to answer our prayers — Matthew 6:5,6 (pray in secret, but He will reward openly); Matthew 7:7-11 (if we will ask, God will give us good things); John 15:7,16 (our requests to God through Christ will be granted).

It would seem that if God were in complete control, His will would constantly and consistently be done. However, in 2 Peter 3:9 we find Peter saying that God “*is longsuffering toward us, not willing (desiring) that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.*” It thus is made clear that God’s will (desire) is that all should repent and be saved. Has that ever come about in the past? No. Is it happening now? No. Is there reason to believe it will occur in the future? None at all. Matthew 7:13 and 14; Matthew 18:8,9,34, and 35; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9, and many other passages reveal that God’s will is going to be spurned by many, even the majority, throughout the existence of the earth.

Friends, we are not guilty of denying the power of God when we accept the fact that He does not exercise constant control of everything in the world. God IS in control, but He is not causing men to do evil and abuse others and violate His written will, the Bible. He IS in control — He has the power to end the existence of this world any time He may determine to do so. In the meantime, He is allowing men to exercise their free moral agency and be wicked if they so choose, but the time will most certainly come when He will put an end to it all. Until then, let us not be guilty, either intentionally or unintentionally, of trying to make God responsible for all that happens in the world.

A black and white photograph of a hand holding a chess piece, with a microscope in the background.

Messages of Truth

Section Three

Truth About Christ

“Immanuel, God With Us”

The Bible tells us that Joseph, betrothed to Mary, was reluctant to follow through with his plan to marry her, due to the fact that it became known that she was pregnant out of wedlock, and certainly not by him. An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, telling him, *“Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins”* (Matthew 1:20-21). Matthew then explains for us that all of this that was taking place was a fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy in Isaiah 7:14, *“Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,”* which is translated, *“God with us”* (Matthew 1:23).

At this point, let me just ask each reader, Can we really comprehend what is being said here? “Immanuel — God with us.” I submit to you that the more we think about this the more mind-boggling it becomes!

It is indeed astounding for an ordinary citizen of any country to actually experience seeing their President, Prime Minister, or whatever title is worn by the one who is the one and only top official of their country. I have a friend who had the honor of being the official greeter of our President on a visit made to our city. Not only did he get to greet the President, he visited for several minutes with this man who is the most powerful person in the world, and all of this was at the request of the President himself! Do you suppose my friend has forgotten about that encounter? Do you suppose that he will ever forget it? I doubt it very much! I’m sure that it is safe to assume that he will always treasure that experience and feel inexpressibly blessed by it.

Here is another question, one that hopefully will elicit an immediate and simple response — How does this event in the life of my friend rank in comparison to the visit by God in the form of His Son to the entire world? Surely we would all have to agree that there is actually no comparison. As great as the leader of any nation is or ever has been, none has ever even remotely approached the greatness of God!

Immanuel — Jesus — was Deity, yet He took upon Himself humanity. “*And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, Justified in the Spirit, Seen by angels, Preached among the Gentiles, Believed on in the world, Received up in glory*” (1 Timothy 3:16). Paul wrote of this again in Philippians 2:5-8, “*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied Himself by taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.*”

John, in John chapter 1, wrote about all of this and he referred to Jesus, not as Immanuel, as Matthew did, but as “*the Word.*” In John 1:1-2 we read, “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.*” In verse 14 John leaves no doubt whatsoever as to whom he is referring: “*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.*” The Word, then, was Jesus Christ, “*the only begotten of the Father.*”

Jesus of Nazareth thus was not merely a remarkable figure in the history of mankind; He was indeed Immanuel, God with us; He was the Word, God in human form. Immanuel revealed to us what God is like (John 1:18; 14:8-9; Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3). Here is the ultimate demonstration of greatness through self-humiliation, the Creator of the entire world being willing to change His form into that of a lowly servant, and willing to endure the ridicule and rejection of nearly all of mankind, whom He had created.

The greatest thing that ever happened is NOT that man has gone to the moon, but that GOD, the Eternal Word, Deity, has come to earth in the person of JESUS CHRIST! IMMANUEL did indeed come, as had been foretold centuries before; John did not lie, nor did he exaggerate — the WORD did become flesh and did dwell among mankind and did come to earth to “*save His people from their sins*” (Matthew 1:21)! Hallelujah! What a Savior!

Do We Really Want Jesus to Be Our Lord?

I believe that the great majority of people realize that we are in need of a savior, one who can somehow free us from our guilt, and hopefully one who can also provide us with real hope for the future. Even without a great deal of diligent study of the Bible, many conclude that they are ready to let Jesus Christ be their Savior.

This is wonderful, isn't it? Would to God that all people everywhere would be willing to let Jesus be their Savior. A fact that is frequently and easily overlooked, however, is that in order for Jesus to be our Savior, we must first make Him our Lord.

It thus becomes essential that we understand the term "Lord" as it is applied to Jesus in the New Testament. The Greek New Testament uses more than one word which is translated into English as "lord," but *kurios* is by far the most commonly used Greek word used with reference to Jesus. This word appears more than 600 times in the New Testament.

A look into the background and secular usage of the word *kurios* will be helpful in determining its significance when it is used with reference to Christ. This was the normal word of respect in addressing other people, much like the English word "sir." This same word was used with reference to an "owner," such as the owner of a vineyard. It was also used for our English word "master," identifying the master or owner, as opposed to a servant or slave (Matthew 6:24; Ephesians 6:5,9). This was the word used to designate the "head of a household." Furthermore, this was at times a legal term, identifying one as a "guardian," one who was responsible for providing help and protection to those in need of such.

Surely the picture is beginning to take on a rather definite form, allowing us to see that this word "lord" was a word of authority. This becomes even more apparent as we see three additional uses of the word. Over time this word became the accepted title of the Roman Emperor; it was used more and more with the names of gods

and goddesses; in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) *kurios* is used for the name of Jehovah, thus becoming in essence the name of God. It is said that it is used this way at least 150 times in the New Testament.

It appears that “Lord” became the great title for Jesus. The scholar W. E. Vine stated that, with only two exceptions, after Christ’s resurrection there is no record of *kurios* ever being used again by believers in addressing anyone but God and Jesus.

With all of this background information in mind, when we refer to Jesus as Lord, or when we call Him Lord, we ought to mean that we acknowledge that we are His servants or slaves and that He is our Master, that He is the owner, the possessor of our life. We ought to think of Him as the Help of the helpless and the Guardian of those in need of protection. Calling Him Lord ought to mean that we accept Him as having authority over all our life, our thoughts, and our actions. In calling Him Lord we need to be thinking of Jesus as the King and Emperor to whom we owe and give our homage, our allegiance, and our loyalty.

The question with which you and I must deal is this — “Does Jesus really mean all of this to us?” As was stated earlier, Jesus cannot be our Savior unless we are willing to make Him our Lord. Someone has stated, “If Christ is not Lord of all, He is not Lord at all.” What a sobering thought!

Lord is not a word to be used flippantly or irreverently. Notice the importance that Jesus attached to the word and its proper usage when He asked, “*And why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not the things which I say*” (Luke 6:46)? Again, Jesus declared in Matthew 7:21, “*Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My father who is in heaven.*” Jesus thus makes it clear that if He is to become the Lord of our life we must treat Him as Lord, and not just address Him as Lord.

Jesus is Lord, whether we accept and acknowledge Him as such or not. We can either confess Him and make Him our Lord now in this life, or we can delay until it is too late to do anything

but confess Him as Lord (Philippians 2:9-11). May we choose to make Him our Lord now, rather than wait and be forced to only acknowledge Him as Lord.

Help Me, Lord, To Really Realize

It is somewhat strange, but an idea, an event, a philosophic point of view, or a personality can sometimes be the subject of considerable attention, but the appropriate amount of attention still be lacking. We may judge a matter to be of importance, but not of great importance. As a result, by our failure to give it the utmost consideration that it truly deserves, we may actually slight something that we feel is *somewhat* significant. Hopefully these thoughts will serve as a suitable introduction to a discussion of a biblical topic that nearly all would agree is important, yet it is still quite possible that it is not in the spotlight as much as it needs to be. I am referring to the death of Jesus, and to the eternal significance of all that He did for us.

The Bible speaks repeatedly in prophecy and in historical statements regarding the fact of Jesus' human experience, His terrible physical and mental suffering, and His willingness to give His very life — and all of that being done for us, for all human beings who have ever or will ever live. Yet, the question continually calls for an answer — “How can we possibly give all of this the attention and emphasis that it deserves?”

In an attempt to help direct our attention to this subject of inestimable significance, let us look once again to the awesome inspired words of the prophet Isaiah, which are recorded in Isaiah chapter 53. Begin reading with me at verse 1:

“Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him.”

Now notice especially verses 4-6. I have chosen to call attention to the emphatic use of the contrasting personal pronouns, because these so eloquently stress what Jesus, the innocent, did for each one of us, the guilty. Reading these verses slowly will help the magnitude of these statements to prick our hearts with the immensity of our guilt and the dreadful price that Jesus paid in our behalf.

*“Surely **He** has borne **our** griefs and carried **our** sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But **He** was wounded for **our** transgressions. **He** was bruised for **our** iniquities; the chastisement of **our** peace was upon **Him**, and by **His** stripes **we** are healed. All **we** like sheep have gone astray; **we** have turned, every one, to **his** (our) own way; and the Lord has laid on **Him** the iniquity of **us** all.”*

Regardless of the number of times that we may have read these words, how can we possibly consider them again without being overwhelmed anew with the burden of our guilt and with the unfathomable grace and mercy of Jesus in becoming the sacrifice for our sins?

Our English translation of some words is sometimes inadequate to reveal the depth of meaning contained in the original biblical languages. Such is the case in verse 5 where we read that Jesus “*was **wounded** for our transgressions, He was **bruised** for our iniquities...*” The scholarly W. E. Vine has stated that these two words, *wounded* and *bruised*, were the strongest terms used to describe a violent and agonizing death. We need to be duly impressed with the intensity and fierceness of the suffering of Jesus for us. What a testimony to the vicarious suffering of Jesus as He substituted **Himself** for **us** on the cross!

All of this has to raise the soul-searching question — “How can we possibly ever repay Jesus for what He has done for us?” Friends, we must make Him our master and allow Him to truly become our Savior through our obedience to His commands for our life. He purchased the right to be our master by paying for our sins in His body on the cross (1 Peter 2:24). It is imperative that we realize, however, that there is absolutely nothing that we can

ever do that will repay Him; nothing will settle our indebtedness to Him. It is most assuredly true that our obedience is essential to our salvation, but it cannot repay Him. Our obedience is an appropriate expression of our profound gratitude to Him, but we cannot repay Jesus — only His sacrifice, grace, and mercy can cover our indebtedness.

We need to read Isaiah 53 repeatedly and regularly. These words will change our lives by helping us to really realize just what Jesus did for us.

Nothing Else Matters

Speaking words of wisdom and truth is not limited to those who have acquired advanced degrees from the most prestigious universities of the world. Such words are not necessarily the product of the minds of folks who have achieved notable success in extremely difficult types of endeavors. Wise statements are not even limited to mature adults — occasionally we are amazed by the wisdom that comes forth from some who are very young, not yet even adolescents.

Now, let's narrow the field somewhat. Is it not true that even wise observations and assessments in the realm of religion are uttered at times by people who are not deep students of the Bible? Many of us have likely heard or read words of great religious significance from the mouth or pen of folks who are not even Christians, either by choice or through lack of biblical knowledge.

Please consider some words of great spiritual importance from one of these seemingly unlikely sources. In so doing, a little bit of background information is needed. One of the better-known names in missionary work is that of E. Stanley Jones. Mr. Jones was renowned for his efforts over many years to evangelize the Hindu nation of India. While not being able to endorse the doctrine that Jones preached, one can surely admire his commitment to do and teach that which he thought to be right. On one particular occasion Mr. Jones was teaching a group of Hindus about Jesus Christ. As

Hindus, they had not had much, if any, exposure to the existence or purpose of Jesus. After hearing Mr. Jones speak very favorably about Jesus and how that Jesus is the only means of salvation for mankind, one very perceptive Hindu man said to the preacher, “If what you are telling us about this Jesus is not true, it doesn’t matter; but if what you are telling us is true, nothing else matters!”

The unbeliever caught on in a hurry — he saw immediately that Jesus was either a fraud or was fantastic. He could see that if Christianity is valid, everything else must be deemed as insignificant by comparison. He quickly realized that if Jesus really is the Savior, to not be *with* Him, or *for* Him, would be the same as being against Him, to be in opposition to Him (Matthew 12:30). This perceptive Hindu had no difficulty in understanding the message from Jesus, “*He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it*” (Matthew 10:39). He could see that unless Jesus proved to be a counterfeit, His followers must put Him first; they must make the success of His mission in this world their greatest priority.

While it is not known whether Mr. Jones explicitly drew attention to and expounded upon the words of Jesus in John 14:6, the response from the man in the audience certainly would lend credence to the possibility that he heard the preacher place special emphasis on the assertion of Jesus, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.*” To seriously contemplate that claim could indeed lead one to fervently respond with the affirmation that nothing else matters at all, if the claims about and by Jesus are based on fact, and are thus accurate.

We are Christ’s church. It would appear that we wholeheartedly believe Jesus really is all that He claimed to be. As His individual followers we wear Christ’s name, and as His collective followers, the church, we similarly acknowledge His ownership and leadership in the name the church wears. However, the question confronts us, “Are we to the point spiritually that nothing else really matters when it comes to establishing and maintaining our priorities in life?”

Peter forcefully declared to a throng of Jews, *“Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ”* (Acts 2:36). This profound assertion underscores for us the fact that since Jesus is the Lord, we then are but servants, being subject to His direction and will. Surely this knowledge should greatly impact our attitudes and actions as His people.

We must be willing to acknowledge the fact that truth is truth, regardless of who says it. While it is not the prevailing practice of those who do not believe in God, or those whose lives are full of wickedness, to speak words of truth and wisdom, it still occurs from time to time. With this in mind, are we prepared to let a Hindu man, one who certainly is not a follower of Jesus Christ, teach us something that we should already know, be preaching, and be practicing?

The Lord’s church should be declaring in word and in deed that “nothing else matters” in comparison with putting Jesus Christ first in all things.

The Other Sacrifices Of Jesus

In spite of the tremendous significance of the sacrifice of His very life on the cross, the death of Jesus Christ continues to be one of the most overlooked events of importance in the history of the world. This awesome incident surely does not receive the amount of our attention that it deserves.

The writer of Hebrews said, *“But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, that He, by the grace of God, **might taste death for everyone**”* (Hebrews 2:9). How can anyone even imagine such a thing?! This astounding statement becomes even more meaningful as we read Paul’s elaboration of the matter in Romans 5:6-11. *“For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His*

own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the reconciliation."

Most assuredly, such a sacrificial deed demands our attention, our thoughtful consideration, and our lifelong expression of appreciation.

Although volumes could rightly be written (and have been) about the sacrificial death of Jesus, let me call attention to some other aspects of the sacrificing that Jesus Christ did as He experienced humanity for the benefit of the entire human race. Please give some lingering thought to just a few of the **other** sacrifices that Jesus made in addition to that incredible sacrifice on Calvary.

(1) He sacrificed living in Heaven for a life here on Earth. The Lord spoke of Himself in John 3:13, *"And no one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, even the Son of Man who is in heaven."* Jesus said these words to Nicodemus while He was still here, but He spoke them knowing that very soon He was going to die and be resurrected and then return to His Father in Heaven. Undoubtedly the sacrifice of leaving Heaven is going to be much more impressive when we see and experience Heaven for ourselves, but surely even now we can marvel that Jesus was willing to sacrifice that glorious place for this ball of dirt called Earth.

(2) Jesus sacrificed being on equality with God the Father (Philippians 2:6,7). The Bible clearly affirms that Jesus was not inferior at all to even God Himself, yet He gave that up in an effort to save us from our sins.

(3) Our Savior sacrificed by allowing Himself to be misrepresented, misunderstood, and falsely accused – all because His compassionate concern was for others and not for Himself.

(4) Jesus sacrificed His will for that of the Father. Remember that Jesus had been equal with God up in heaven, but as a human

He says, “...*I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me*” (John 5:30). Another time Jesus declared, “*My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work*” (John 4:34). Of course, the best remembered words of Christ along this line were His prayers in Gethsemane as he agonized over His approaching death. Twice He implored the Father, “*O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will*” (Matthew 26:39,42).

(5) Jesus sacrificed by enduring rejection and humiliation. He was ridiculed and mocked, and even many of His disciples forsook Him. Instead of demanding that people acknowledge Him for who He really was, the Son of God allowed Himself to be made fun of.

(6) The sacrifices of Jesus included being poor after having been partaker of the riches of heaven. In 2 Corinthians 8:9 Paul declared, “*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.*” Jesus testified as to His poverty when He said, “*Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head*” (Matthew 8:20).

Much more could be said regarding the sacrifices of Jesus, but suffice it to say that His entire life was a sacrifice, and all of it, including His death, was for our eternal benefit. He sacrificed Himself to make possible the salvation of the entire world. Just how thankful are we?

“Jesus, Our. . .”

Most, if not all, who are inclined to read these words would agree that Jesus Christ is the most dynamic, life-changing, powerful personality to ever enter this world. These are only a few of the adjectives that could be appropriately used to describe Jesus of Nazareth. No one has ever had the impact upon humanity that Jesus had and has. Far more books have been written concerning Him than any other of the great number of outstanding men and women who have lived. It is just as the apostle John said, “*And there are also*

many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (John 21:25).

Perhaps it would be helpful and enlightening for us to briefly consider just a few of the relationships that we have with this one who is called Jesus.

Jesus Is Our. . .

1. Creator. John 1:1-3 shows clearly that Jesus was in the beginning with God and that He was a vital part of that creative force that brought the whole world into existence from nothingness. This corresponds with Genesis 1:26.

2. Friend. What a marvelous thought that we can claim Jesus as our friend! He said that we can do this if we do what He commands of us (John 15:13-15).

3. Lord. The Bible repeatedly identifies Jesus as our “Lord.” If He is our Lord we are submissive to His direction and His authority. Without this, He cannot and will not be our Lord.

4. Savior. Surely we cherish the idea that Jesus is our “Savior.” He has saved us from the guilt of our sins and from the punishment reserved for those who reject Him.

5. Redeemer. Jesus has bought us back, He has “redeemed” us (Titus 2:14). He has become our redeemer in that He has purchased our freedom from sin.

6. Lamb. The Mosaical sacrifices were specific. Among those sacrifices was that of a lamb with no spots or blemishes. Only Jesus could qualify as our sacrificial lamb (1 Peter 1:18-19).

7. Propitiation. John says that Jesus “*is the propitiation for our sins*” (1 John 2:2). This means that Jesus is the means of getting us back into the good favor of God.

8. Peace. In Ephesians 2:14 Paul says that Jesus “*is our peace.*” Without Him, there is no true peace. With Him, we can truly have “peace, perfect peace.”

9. Example. As a result of His human experience, Jesus is definitely qualified to be our example — He has shown us how to live victoriously (1 Peter 2:21).

10. Shepherd. As Christians we are the sheep of a shepherd who was willing to give His all for His flock (John 10:11-16). Let us rejoice in knowing that *“the Lord is my shepherd.”*

11. High Priest. Jesus is our High Priest, offering our sacrifices to God for us. The Father will give careful attention to what our High Priest says and does, because Jesus understands our weaknesses, having been tempted just like we are (Hebrews 4:14-15).

12. Advocate, Intercessor, Mediator. Even though we are Christians, we still continue to sin at times. Jesus pleads our case before God, asking the Father to be merciful and to forgive our sins when we are willing to repent (1 John 2:1; Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25; 1 Timothy 2:5).

13. Judge. Jesus is going to be the judge on that last great day (2 Corinthians 5:10), and He will exercise judgment that is totally fair, remembering His own human experience. His judgment will be without prejudice and will reflect His perfect wisdom and holiness.

14. Hope. To be without hope is surely one of the greatest miseries that mankind can ever encounter. Paul characterized Jesus as *“our hope”* (1 Timothy 1:1). Those who die without having ever become His faithful and obedient followers die without hope. But those of us who wear His name and who obey His will and proclaim His message have hope. Jesus is our hope.

The Scriptures include several more identifications of Jesus that are not included in this list, but hopefully these will suffice in renewing our appreciation for Him. There could hardly be a more appropriate way to close these thoughts about Jesus than to repeat those immortal words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 9:15, *“Thanks be to God for His unspeakable gift!”*

I'm Glad That Jesus Was Tempted

Have you ever felt glad that Jesus was tempted to sin while He lived here on the earth? I am very glad that He experienced temptation as a human being. Please do not misunderstand. I am not at all saying that Jesus **sinned**. I remember that the Hebrews

writer stated that Jesus did not sin (Hebrews 4:15), and that Peter said that Jesus “*did not sin, neither was guile found in his mouth*” (1 Peter 2:22). I understand that temptation is not sin — it is what causes a person to want to sin.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all recorded the fact that Jesus, after His baptism by John, was subjected to three temptations by Satan. We perhaps have the idea at times that this series of trials constituted all of the temptations that Jesus was ever subjected to. However, Luke says that after these three temptations the devil “*departed from Him for a season*” (Luke 4:13). Satan left Him, but only for a while. That was not the end of all of the temptations of Jesus. Hebrews 4:15 tells us that our Lord was “*in all points tempted like as we are....*” Hebrews 2:18 states, “*For in that He himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted.*” These verses declare to us that Jesus Christ, though being the very Son of God, endured temptations just like we do today.

The Bible is telling us that sin was at times attractive and appealing even to Jesus! If this were not true, then there would have been no temptation involved, would there? To realize and acknowledge that Jesus also found it difficult to not engage in sin ought not to cause our faith in Him to waver, not at all. Rather, it ought to increase our faith in Him! We have a Savior who was sinless in spite of sin’s enticement and allurements. He was not without sin because He could not be tempted — He was without sin because He overcame the desire to participate in sin! He wanted to please His Father much more than He wanted to please Himself. That was the key.

Whoever says that it is easy to live as a Christian must be living in a different world from the one in which I am living. Just as Satan was actively trying to get Jesus to give in to temptation, so is he constantly attempting to mislead us into thinking that we don’t really need to try to please God all of the time. Surely we can all identify with the concern expressed by the spiritually-minded Paul in Romans 7:18 and 19. There the apostle says, “*For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the*

good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice.” Although Paul certainly struggled with temptation and sin, he was reassured by the knowledge that even though God does allow us to be tempted, He never allows us to be tempted beyond our ability to overcome the temptation (1Corinthians 10:13).

When Jesus was tempted, His knowledge of God’s Word was a great help. He relied upon the Scriptures for strength in times of weakness. We are reminded of the notable words of David in Psalm 119:11, *“Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.”* Jesus had hidden God’s Word in His heart; then when Satan attacked Him, Jesus had the weapons of the Scriptures with which to battle the enemy. He not only **knew** what the Word said, He had **complete trust** in that Word. Jesus was also a Man of prayer. We should gain confidence in prayer from the words of Hebrews 4:16, *“Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”*

Yes, I’m glad that Jesus was not immune to the appeal of sin. The Bible tells us in Hebrews 7:25 that Jesus ever lives to make intercession for those who draw near unto God through Him. What a tremendous blessing this is! Just think, as we pray to God through Christ, that same Christ who knows just what it is to be tempted is pleading to the Father in our behalf, remembering that Satan has the ability to make sin very attractive to man. How could we ask for more?

But wait — there is more. Such verses as 2 Timothy 4:1 and 8, Matthew 16:27, Acts 10:42, 2 Corinthians 5:10, and Matthew 25:31-34 reveal that this same Jesus who was tempted and who now intercedes for us is going to be the judge who will hear our case and declare our eternal destiny. As our judge, Jesus will offer to us the consolation that He has been in our shoes, He has experienced human life with its problems and trials. Because He will be my judge, I am very glad that Jesus was tempted.

A black and white photograph of a hand holding a chess piece, with a microscope in the background.

Messages of Truth

Section Four

Truth and Christian Living

Service = The Key to Success

I never knew him at all. In spite of the fact that thousands of people had come to know him through the years, his name was still unknown to me and to most other folks in the church. Yet he was a Christian who was more actively involved in serving the Lord than most of us ever have been or ever will be.

The passing of C. W. Peacock over twenty years ago brought sadness to many, many people. But you may ask, “Who in the world was C. W. Peacock? Is this some kind of a joke? I’ve never even heard his name before.”

You might never have heard of this man, but let me assure you that multitudes of people have and are grateful for having met this dedicated Christian.

Let me tell you a little bit about C. W. Peacock. A member of one of the congregations in Little Rock, Arkansas, he died at the age of 90. Now get this – for 25 years this old soldier of the cross rode city busses to four major hospitals in Little Rock, visiting 100 patients per week!

Now, let’s do some arithmetic together. One hundred visits per week for 52 weeks equals 5,200 visits per year, and 5,200 visits per year over the span of 25 years equals the utterly amazing figure of 130,000 hospital visits! Can you feature such a thing? In spite of the fact that I have known of this man’s accomplishment since shortly after his death, I still can hardly fathom the reality of what he did.

Do you suppose that brother Peacock ever said to himself, “It’s so rainy and cold today, I think I’ll just not do any visiting today”? Or, might he have said to himself, “I don’t feel all that great today myself – somebody ought to be visiting me instead of me going out all over the city to see others like I do”? Just think about all of the sadness and heartache that he witnessed in those 130,000 hospital visits. Surely there were occasions when he became weary of being around so much sickness and misery. Undoubtedly he

struggled at times as he saw firsthand the problems of others and was unable to keep them from becoming somewhat his own problems.

I'm confident that C. W. Peacock was just as human as the rest of us, resulting in his feeling unqualified, without much to offer to the Lord, unappreciated, neglected, and overlooked by others. However, a desire to serve the Lord through serving others enabled him to overcome his times of disappointment and his feelings of inadequacy.

I truly believe that a great many Christians would become more active in their service in the church if they could only become convinced that they are needed and have something of significance to offer. Many say to themselves, "What can I do in the church? I don't have any real talent; I can't preach; I could never serve as an elder. I'm just not a leader."

Friends, most people are not leaders. Furthermore, that is good — very good. There must always be many more good followers than good leaders. Good leaders are indeed of great importance, and are usually hard to find, but the fact remains that faithful and supportive followers are the backbone of every organization and society.

We all have something to give, whether we recognize our talents or capabilities or not. Most, if not all, of us have had the experience of surprising ourselves by accomplishing something that we didn't really think we could do. We undertook the task with serious doubts about our ability to be successful, but with the attitude of at least giving our best effort, somehow that which we thought within ourselves was impossible became possible. This same thing has happened countless times in spiritual matters, too. Every day there are Christians around the world who are discovering that the Lord is true to His word, that He will indeed be with us in our efforts to serve Him.

Let there be no doubt whatsoever — the real strength of the church will never lie in those few who are in leadership roles that put them in a position of being well-known and recognized

as prominent and prestigious. While the church will never be successful in accomplishing the Lord's will in this world without godly leaders, the ultimate success of the church of Christ is dependent upon those soldiers in His army who are daily dedicating themselves to doing whatever they can to glorify Him and cause His name and His fame to be spread throughout the earth.

Do you suppose that Jesus will one day say, "C. W. Peacock, I was sick, and you visited Me"?

I wonder what He will say to me...and to you.

Immersed In Christ

The Bible stipulates that baptism is only by immersion. The New Testament was written in Greek, and the Greek word for baptism allows only for immersion, or burial.

The Bible also specifies that the purpose of baptism (immersion) is for the forgiveness (remission) of our past sins. This is borne out by such Scriptures as Acts 2:38, Acts 22:16, 1 Peter 3:21, and others.

The Bible further indicates that when one is baptized for the forgiveness of his sins he is immersed **into** Christ. Paul affirms this in Galatians 3:27, "*For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.*" He makes the same affirmation in Romans 6:3, where he says, "*Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?*"

Thus, immersion is of deep significance and importance. However, there is a biblical immersion that is **not into Christ**, and it is this second immersion to which your attention is now invited.

Webster's unabridged dictionary defines the word "*immerse*" as follows: "to plunge, drop, or dip into or as if into a liquid, especially so as to cover completely. To plunge into a specified state; to involve or engage deeply; as he was immersed in thought." Please keep this information in mind as we proceed.

As was stated earlier, the Bible requires immersion into Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of our sins. But, believe it or not, that really is not enough! We must also be immersed **in** Christ if we are to be His true and faithful disciples. It's true that the Bible never uses the specific expression "immersed in Christ," but that idea is very plainly taught.

To be "immersed in Christ" means to be deeply involved or engaged in Christ. Yes, immersion **into** Christ is commanded by the Bible, but the Scriptures also require immersion **in** Christ. When Jesus said, "*But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you*" (Matthew 6:33), He was talking about our being immersed **in** Him. In Matthew 22:36 the Lord was asked, "*Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?*" Jesus responded, "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment.*" In this response Jesus was saying essentially, "Your commitment to God must include everything you have and are — you must immerse yourself in Me."

In the familiar words of Romans 12:1, Paul advocated being immersed **in** Christ in this way, "*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.*" Paul brought this subject of immersion in Christ before the church at Corinth, as evidenced by his words in 1 Corinthians 15:58, "*Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, inasmuch as you know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.*"

Is it possible for one to have been immersed **into** Christ, but never have really become immersed **in** Christ? Most definitely so. How serious a matter is this? Just these few verses (out of a whole host that could be used) should suffice in showing the seriousness of this matter. In James 5:19-20, the Lord's brother wrote, "*Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.*" Paul

very clearly warned the Corinthians (and us), “*Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall*” (1 Corinthians 10:12). Perhaps even more noteworthy and impressive is the testimony of the faithful and unrelenting Paul regarding his own personal struggle to continue his immersion **in** Christ — “*But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified*” (1 Corinthians 9:27) There can be no doubt, then, that it is possible to have been immersed **into** Christ, to have been immersed **in** Christ for a period of time, and then to somehow have become more and more slack in our commitment to the Lord, even to the ultimate point of falling away and turning our back on Him who made possible our salvation.

Surely our study of God’s Word will help us to clearly see and firmly believe that:

1. It is necessary for one to be immersed **into** Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins;
2. It is equally necessary that we also be immersed (deeply involved) **IN** Jesus Christ in order to have any reasonable expectation of an eternal home in heaven.

The Poor in Spirit

When Jesus, in Matthew 5:3, says, “*Blessed are the poor in spirit...*” of whom is He speaking? What are characteristics of such a person?

I am told that the Greek word used here and translated “poor” is a word that describes utter and absolute poverty. It doesn’t describe the man who does not have luxury; it describes the man who has nothing at all. Jesus then is saying, “Blessed is he who is completely poverty-stricken.”

The Lord actually spoke the beatitudes in Aramaic rather than Greek. The word He spoke here that we read as “poor” was to the Jews a description of a man who had absolutely no earthly resources and who thus placed his entire trust in God.

I assume that we all understand that Jesus intended a spiritual application of His words, not a literal physical application. As we put the Greek and the Aramaic backgrounds together we see that Jesus is talking about the man who completely trusts in God because he realizes that he himself is totally helpless and God can help him to become something meaningful.

Let me say here that I don't believe that this just "happened" to be the first of these beatitudes spoken by Jesus. At the very heart and core of being "*poor in spirit*" is humility. I believe that the Lord would have us to understand that possessing and displaying humility is absolutely essential before we can develop the other attributes that depict the life of one who is striving to please and honor Him.

There surely is some validity to the idea that humility is "the most beautiful flower in the Christian garden." We all admire and appreciate humility — in others. Demonstrating it in our own lives is another matter, however. The presence of humility requires the absence of ego, and that is difficult for most of us. It's not easy for us to really accept the wisdom of Jesus spoken in Matthew 23:12: "*And whoever exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*" As always, though, Jesus paved the way for us by setting a divine example of humility. In so doing, He also provided us with proof that humility really does bring about exaltation.

Let's read again the wonderful words of Philippians 2:5-11: "*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied Himself by taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God*"

the Father.” If these words are true, and they are, then we should be ready and willing to “follow in His steps” by emptying and humbling ourselves. In so doing, we will also be exalted ultimately.

Seeing ourselves as we really are can make it much easier to humble ourselves, to be “*poor in spirit.*” The story is told about an elderly Scotswoman who came from the Highlands into the city of Edinburgh for the first time, and while there had her photograph taken. Gazing at the result, she handed it back and exclaimed, “My, but it’s a humbling sight!” How true for us all! To be able to see ourselves as God sees us would undoubtedly rid us all of every shred of conceit and pride that stands to hinder our achieving the exaltation and honor that can only come from Him.

At least some of the thinkers of the past were successful in recognizing and advocating the tremendous importance of being “*poor in spirit.*” Erasmus said, “It is vain to gather virtues without humility; for the spirit of God delights to dwell in the hearts of the humble.” Augustine strongly advised the pursuit of humility as he said “Should you ask me, ‘What is the first thing in religion?’ I should reply, ‘The first, second, and third thing therein is humility.’”

We all need to individually look closely at our attitudes toward ourselves and toward God. Do we really view ourselves as being totally helpless without God? Is it our spirit or attitude that we put first, that we acknowledge our own lack of significance and brilliance, that we “*seek first His kingdom and His righteousness*”?

May God grant us the spiritual fortitude and humility necessary to be “*poor in spirit.*”

Peace=Makers: Passive or Active?

We are familiar with the beatitudes of Jesus in Matthew chapter 5, including the one in verse 9: “*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.*” Let’s look again at this idea of peacemaking, this time from perhaps a different perspective.

Peace is a wonderful thing and should be sought after with much diligence. Peace exists because of peacemaking. We need to understand that the peace referred to by Jesus is much more than just the absence of bad things — it also involves the presence of those things which are good and spiritually healthful. It includes that which helps to bring about man's highest good. This all results from the activity of peacemakers.

Peacemakers are themselves peaceable and peace-lovers, but they are much more than that: they bring about or produce peace. They love peace enough to sacrifice themselves in an effort to create, restore, and maintain peace. Many who are *peaceable and lovers of peace* are unwilling to put themselves in a position of risk by becoming peacemakers. Peace is the result of much activity and effort.

Peacemakers are children of God who love both God and their fellow man enough to do that which is often difficult and unpleasant, that which can result in alienation and a loss of popularity. Peacemakers are willing to pay the cost that goes with presenting themselves to God as His instruments for making and maintaining peace. They sometimes suffer disappointment and discouragement as they see that their efforts are not always successful. Paul urges in Romans 12:18, "*If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.*"

We learn here that peace will not always exist, in spite of the efforts of peacemakers and peaceable persons. Unfortunately, not everyone wants peace. Thus, peacemakers do not always succeed in their peacemaking efforts. However, Proverbs 12:20 states a principle that remains true today: "*Counselors of peace have joy.*" Those who allow God to use their love for truth, righteousness, and souls truly experience joy through knowing that they have walked in the footsteps of "*the Prince of Peace*" (Isaiah 9:6).

Peace that results from the sacrifice of principle is not really peace. That one who would compromise the Word of God so that folks can "get along" is not a peacemaker. Let me say in all honesty and kindness, that person is actually a peace-breaker rather than a peace-maker.

When peace has been destroyed or is being threatened, by far the easiest course of action is to take no action at all, but to simply ignore the problem or pretend that it does not exist. Sweeping a lack of peace “under the rug” does not get rid of the matter and certainly does nothing toward correction and the making or restoring of peace. Failing to take appropriate action to eradicate a problem and restore peace is not making peace, but is in reality making trouble. Such decisions actually compound the lack of peace. It is just like failing to treat an illness in its early stages, only to learn later to our dismay that what became a life-threatening condition could have been avoided with appropriate early treatment. Evading and avoiding problems does not make for peace. Again, Jesus did not say, “Blessed are those who desire peace whether or not they are willing to pursue it.” Instead, He said, “*Blessed are the peacemakers...*”

Elders are particularly responsible for being peacemakers. Paul discusses some qualifications and responsibilities of elders in Titus, chapter one. Beginning in verse 9, he declares that elders are to be men who know the Bible and who use the Scriptures to bring about peace by confronting and silencing those who are destroying the peace through their false teaching and deceitfulness. There are even times when the peace has been so shattered by those who are “*walking disorderly*” that the Lord would have us to “*withdraw ourselves*” from such wayward and disruptive brethren (2 Thessalonians 3:6-15), and elders must take the lead in this unpleasant action.

Peacemakers are spiritually-minded individuals who are willing and able to view situations in relation to a longer period of time rather than merely the present. They are not concerned simply with the current circumstance, but with the ultimate results which are likely, depending on what is or is not done now.

The Bible frequently refers to God as “*the God of peace*” (Romans 15:33; 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Philippians 4:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 13:20). In His beatitude in Matthew 5:9, Jesus promises that peacemakers “*shall be called sons of God.*” What Jesus is saying is that by being peacemakers we can become

partakers of the character of God, we can become God-like. Please be reminded, however, that this is possible only for those who promote peace by actively pursuing it. May God raise up more peace-makers, Christians who have the courage and conviction to do all within their power to bring about and preserve peace.

Needed: A Covenant With Our Eyes (Job 31:1)

In the course of his great endurance test, the remarkable Job made this statement of immense significance: *“I have made a covenant with my eyes; why then should I look upon a young woman?”* (Job 31:1). Just what is it that Job is saying here? What does he mean when he says that he had made a “covenant” with his eyes? He is saying that he had made an agreement, a commitment, a vow, a pledge to himself.

In the second part of the verse Job talks about “looking” upon a young woman. Here he has reference to more than just casually looking at or seeing a young woman. The “looking” that he is talking about is the idea of looking intently, looking with impure thoughts, looking with lust. Thus, Job is saying, “I have made an agreement with my eyes, that they are not going to be used to cause me to unduly desire a woman in a way that is wrong in the eyes of God. I have made a commitment that I am not going to let myself look lustfully upon a woman. I have pledged to myself that I am not going to allow my eyes to cause me to sin.”

This covenant is truly something that all mankind, especially Christians, should make a part of their lives. The wisdom of Job is exhibited by these great words. He had somehow come to realize the importance of what Jesus would say several centuries later in Matthew 5:27-30. In that passage the Lord told the multitude, *“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart”* (verses 27,28).

This is exactly the kind of “looking” against which Job had made a covenant with his eyes. Certainly he was wise in doing so, for Jesus proceeded to point out in the next verse, “*And if your right eye causes you to sin, **pluck it out and cast it from you**; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell*” (verse 29). I’m confident that Jesus worded this verse this way for the sake of emphasis, yet I have no doubt whatsoever that He also intended for us to realize that it truly would be to our eternal advantage to literally have our eye removed from our body, if that were the only way that we could avoid sinning.

David had an “eye problem” occasionally (remember Bathsheba), but in a more thoughtful moment he wrote, “*I will set nothing wicked before my eyes*” (Psalm 101:3). There is indeed some truth in the saying that “what I don’t see won’t hurt me.” Certainly that saying is not accurate in every circumstance, but it undoubtedly is true when it comes to avoiding temptation and sin by not allowing our eyes to even look upon the situation.

In 2 Peter 2:14 Peter spoke of some people “*having eyes full of adultery and that cannot cease from sin....*” Friends, every one of us, both male and female, is susceptible to being like those folks. It can and does happen. But, it doesn’t have to happen. We can, with God’s help, keep it from happening. Remember the assurance given to us all in 1 Corinthians 10:13: “*No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.*” There it is — we can conquer even the temptations of sensuality. We must do so if we are to be pleasing to the Lord and if we are serious about wanting to go to heaven.

Every married person needs to make the same covenant that Job made. It is imperative that each one truly commit himself/herself to never allow his/her eyes to look upon any other person in such a way as to place a strain on the marriage relationship or to place his/her own soul in danger. Let me especially plead with those who are making marriage plans to do their very best to understand

the seriousness of entering into such a relationship, and to make a covenant with their eyes that they will always “have eyes” only for that one special person whom they plan to marry.

A “roving eye” can be a part of anyone’s body, but it can be a part of us only if we allow it. Job had a choice — he could be in control, or he could allow himself to be controlled. You and I have the same choice. What will we choose? Let us all make a covenant with our eyes.

Making A Difference

Christians are different. Those of us who are in the church and belong to God, who have been purchased by the blood of Christ (Acts 20:28), are different. We are not the same as people who do not have that relationship with God — we are “*His own special people*” (1 Peter 2:9); we are different. God and His Son both expect and intend for us to be different from the world.

Because we are different, we ought also to **make a difference**. If that is true, it becomes important that we know what kind of a difference the Lord expects us to make. We must also somehow figure out how we can go about making this difference that is our responsibility to make.

We should make a difference in the quality of the world in which we live by the way that we live. Because of us, there should be more love displayed. 1 John 4:8 says that “*God is love.*” As His children, we are to be like Him; thus, we also must exhibit love.

We must be serious about making a difference in the morality of the world. The Bible is the Christian’s standard, our guide through life. The standard of morality found in the Bible will make a tremendous difference in our world if it is ever practiced by a very significant part of the world. But for that to ever come about, Christians are going to have to first live by that standard, and then teach others to do the same. The church, as God’s special people, can and must show that we are different because of our high standard

of honesty and integrity. The world can be influenced by our being known for always being truthful and reliable in all our transactions and activities. We will make a difference for some if we will demonstrate to them that purity of life is not an impossibility, and that it most definitely has its rewards, even in this life.

You and I, as Christians, must set the example the world needs in showing compassion for our fellow man. Jesus taught us and showed us the need for and the blessings of compassion; now He expects us to do the same for the rest of mankind.

Then there is the matter of hope. Christians are the only people in the whole world who can reveal the one realistic hope for eternity. With that capability comes responsibility — the responsibility to make a difference in the world by proclaiming our hope, Jesus Christ, to the lost. Multitudes all around us are struggling along with hardly any hope in this life, and certainly with no reason for any hope beyond this life. You and I can make a difference by giving them reason to hope now, but more importantly, reason to hope in the prospect of eternity.

In order for us to really make a difference, we Christians must be people of conviction. We must be willing to study the Bible diligently in order to know and understand what the will of God is. After learning God's will through His Word, we then must commit ourselves to living according to those instructions and principles. Those who are outside the church, even when they disagree with us, should be made to respect us because of the kind of people we are and the fact that we stand for what is good and right, to the best of our knowledge.

As an individual Christian, I can make a difference, not only in the world, but I can do the same in the church. I can encourage my fellow Christians to live more faithfully and zealously for Christ. I can very specifically encourage them by my words of admonition and praise. I can also strengthen their commitment to the Lord by the way that I live. But I have to be consistent in how I live; they don't always let me know when they are watching me.

It is very true that we Christians do not all have the same abilities. We cannot serve the Lord in exactly the same ways. But, if we are going to change the world or the church for the better, we will not succeed in doing it passively. We can and will make a difference only through actively serving the Lord with whatever abilities we have, and not through living the philosophy of “Live, and let live.” We certainly cannot force people to change their way of life or their convictions, but that does not mean that we should not be active, even aggressive, and even militant at times. The church can make a difference by actively, aggressively, and militantly promoting what is right and opposing what is wrong. Please remember, though, that all of our words and actions must be motivated by love and compassion, and must be accompanied by the same.

If my life comes to a close without having influenced others for good, without having improved the world, and without having helped the church to be stronger, then I will not have made a difference. If I have not made a difference, my life will have been lived in vain.

May God help both you and me to truly **make a difference**.

To Judge, or Not to Judge

The words of Jesus in Matthew 7:1 are often quoted fervently today. They read, “*Judge not, that you be not judged.*” If there are any words from Scripture that would qualify as “politically correct” today, then surely these are those words. This is an age in which it is advocated that men are to “live and let live,” opting to ignore, excuse, or condone any and all behavior, regardless of its violation of God’s law.

The following observations are not offered in an attempt to justify any kind of judging by anyone that is in opposition to what the Bible teaches. This is not an effort to endorse unjust criticism or engage in condemnation, but it is an exercise in studying the biblical concept of judging on the part of Christians.

Many assert that Jesus is prohibiting the judging involved in calling attention to the sins of others, yet these same people are condemning what they see in others. In other words, they feel totally qualified and justified in judging those whom they believe to be guilty of judging others. One is made to wonder how and why judging is considered by these people to be admirable when they do the judging, while at the same time they declare with vehemence that the same judging is wrong for others. How can it be right for them if it is wrong for all others? I believe that the answer is that it cannot be right, and the basis for that response is found in the inspired words of Paul in Romans 2:1, where he says, “*Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; **for you who judge do the same things***” (emphasis added).

As is typically the case in Bible study, it is important to consider the context of this declaration from Jesus, “*Judge not, that you be not judged.*” Reading Matthew 7:2-5 sheds some very important light on His words in verse 1. In those following verses the Lord made it clear that His grave concern was not about the action of judging itself, but about the fallacy of a judgment being done by one who is hypocritically judging, trying to divert attention from his own sins by turning the spotlight on the sins of another.

In verse 1 Jesus has just said that it is wrong to judge others, yet in verse 6 He calls for action on the part of His followers which **requires** judging! Here He says, “*Do not give what is holy to the dogs, nor cast your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you in pieces.*” The Lord here creates some questions for us: (1) Just what is “holy”? (2) Who are the “dogs”? (3) What are the “pearls”? (4) Who are the “swine”? In order for us to comply with the Lord’s commands in this verse, we must have clarification of these terms which He used in an obviously symbolic way. For us to answer these four questions by identifying to whom or what Jesus was referring, we have no choice but to engage in judging. To do less would be to ignore this divine order. Whoa! Is Jesus vacillating back and forth like a weed in the

wind by saying “don’t judge,” and then almost immediately turning right around and contradicting what He had just said? Not at all!

Of course the words of Christ do not stand or fall on the confirmation or endorsement of anyone else, but Paul echoed the teaching of the Lord when he affirmed that the Jews were not in a position to be hypocritically judging the Gentiles, being equally guilty of having violated God’s law — read carefully Romans 2:21-23.

In John 7:24, Jesus again said, “*Do not judge.*” But it is imperative that we note the words that followed. His total statement was, “*Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment*” (emphasis added). Friends, this is the key to the whole matter of any judging done by us as human beings — judge **righteously**, not maliciously, not hypocritically.

Jesus and those writers of the New Testament (who were inspired by the Holy Spirit) have made it non-negotiable that Christians engage in righteous judging every day of our lives. Let me offer just a few of the multitude of possible illustrations of this truth as found in our New Testament.

1. In Romans 16:17, Paul urged Christians to note (or mark) those in the church who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to what they have been taught. It is impossible to do this without comparing the Scriptures with contrary teachings, and ultimately arriving at a judgment on the matter.
2. Paul, in 1 Timothy 6:20 and 2 Timothy 2:23, said to “*avoid profane and vain babblings,*” as well as “*foolish and ignorant disputes.*” To be faithful in doing this we must be able to judge what is profane, vain, foolish, and ignorant.
3. 1 Corinthians 15:33 exhorts us to not keep company with “evil” people, who will corrupt our good behavior. To be obedient in this we must be able to determine, or judge, who or what is evil and who or what is not. Surely that must be done on the basis of what is taught in the Bible, but it still requires some judging on our part.
4. Paul makes it abundantly clear in 1 Corinthians 6:5 that the

church is to have men who can handle necessary judging of matters of conflict between fellow Christians.

5. In 2 John 9-11, the apostle John calls upon the church to reject any who do not abide in the doctrine of Christ. Making a determination that someone is not abiding in the doctrine of Christ is the same thing as making a judgment.
6. Another very apparent teaching that is in conflict with much of today's thinking regarding judging is found in 1 John 4:1: "*Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.*" Determining whether a "spirit" is of God, or whether one is a "false prophet" necessitates judging based on the Word of God.
7. We have a command from the apostle Paul, "...*in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us*" (2 Thessalonians 3:6), once again making it quite clear that Jesus never intended His words in Matthew 7:1 to be interpreted as a prohibition of all kinds of judging on the part of men.

These few are representative of the great many examples of righteous judging that the New Testament calls upon Christians to make.

It is essential that we understand that there are indeed judgments that we absolutely have no authority to make. Included among these are judgments that are rendered with an un-Christian attitude. Also included are those judgments which belong only to God and Christ. We have no authority whatsoever to thrust ourselves into areas of judgment which are solely matters for the Godhead. It is not that difficult to determine from the Scriptures which matters of judgment belong to the Father and the Son, as opposed to those for which we are responsible.

Let us not succumb to peer pressure that would have us to refrain from making those kinds of judgments for which we will one day be held accountable.



Messages of Truth

Section Five

Truth and the Church

Let Me Introduce the Churches of Christ

If you are not a member of the church of Christ and have been given this publication by someone from a local congregation of the church, you may well be somewhat curious about this religious group. Following are a few questions that you perhaps would like to have answered concerning us as a church. Hopefully these questions and answers will be helpful in better acquainting you with who we are and what we believe and practice.

"How does the church of Christ regard the Bible?"

This is a vitally important question. We regard the Bible as being God's inspired Word (2 Timothy 3:16-17). We believe that it is without error, that its recorded miracles occurred literally, that the book of Genesis tells how the world actually began, that the miracles found in the Bible really took place, that Jesus was truly born of a virgin, that He literally died, that He was literally raised from the dead by God, that He is living right now in Heaven with God, and that the faithful followers of Jesus will be saved eternally by the grace of God in Heaven, and that the disobedient and unbelieving will experience eternity in a very real Hell. We believe that the Bible contains all of God's revealed will for mankind, with no additional revelations having ever taken place (Jude 3), and that it is to remain free from any additions or subtractions by men.

"When did this church begin and who started it?"

This church, the church of Christ, began long before the Christian religion became so divided. It began in Jerusalem in about A.D. 30-33. We read about its beginning in the second chapter of Acts. That chapter tells about the church being started on the day of Pentecost, shortly after the death of Jesus. He had promised to build His church (Matthew 16:18), and He had told His apostles that it would come into existence in the city of Jerusalem and that

it would take place when they were given special “*power from on high*” (Luke 24:46-49). We find that very thing happening in Acts 2, and the end of that chapter tells us that the church had then just become a reality (verses 37-47).

“How is your denomination different from the others?”

Since there are denominations all around us, it is understandable that many people regard churches of Christ as just another denomination. However, this is inaccurate. As was pointed out in the previous paragraph, the church that belongs to Christ, the one that He promised to build, was started in the early part of the first century. The very oldest denominations did not begin until several hundred years later, and many of them have begun only within the last 100 years. The idea of denominations involves the concept of parts of a whole. The church of Christ had existed for many, many years before any of these “parts” came into being.

We are different from other churches in that we have no creed books, but do our best to adhere only to the Bible as our source of religious authority. We believe that Christ has all authority (Matthew 28:18-20). If Christ has **all** authority, that means that no one else has **any** authority.

If you were to visit our worship services (which we would be highly pleased for you to do) you would notice a few distinctive differences from other churches. For example, you would find that we have only congregational singing and we sing without any instrumental accompaniment. This is not because we regard musical instruments themselves as sinful, but because we find no record of the early church having any worship music other than just vocal (a cappella) music. You would also notice that we have a communion service every Sunday, rather than each month, quarter, year, etc. Again, this is done every week because that is what was done by the church from its beginning.

“Who governs the Church of Christ?”

The Bible teaches us that Jesus Himself is the head of the church (Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 1:22,23; 5:23). He has delegat-

ed oversight of individual congregations to qualified men that the Bible calls elders, presbyters, pastors, overseers, or bishops. These men are responsible only for their own congregation, not for a plurality of congregations. Most congregations have a preacher, but he is not the overseer of the congregation.

"Is the church really all that important?"

Because some ungodly things are sometimes done in the name of organized religion, it is not uncommon for folks to decide that they still have a high regard for Jesus, but not for organized churches. Certainly not everything done in the name of Christ is truly Christianity, but it is essential that we understand that the Lord's church (the church we read about in the Bible) exists because God planned for it from the beginning of time (Ephesians 3:11); Old Testament prophets foretold its establishment and its importance; Jesus promised to build it (Matthew 16:18); He is the head of it (see the paragraph above); it belongs to Christ, having been purchased by Him with His blood (Acts 20:28); and all of the saved people are in it (Acts 2:47). Surely we can thus see that the church is of the highest importance. To be saved we must be a part of the church.

"What would I need to do to become a member of your church?"

Since the church is not ours, but Christ's, He is the one who has determined the steps to be taken in order to gain membership in the church. We must **believe that He is the Son of God** (John 8:24). We must **confess our faith in Him** as God's Son (Romans 10:9-10). We must **repent of (turn away from) our sins** (Luke 13:3,5; Acts 2:38; 17:30; 2 Peter 3:9). We must **be baptized into Christ for the remission (forgiveness) of our past sins** (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1 Peter 3:21).

When one does these things, he or she is added to the church by the Lord (Acts 2:47), not voted on by men. We must then live a life of faithful obedience to Him (Hebrews 5:8-9; Revelation 2:10). These are the conditions of church membership that the Bible reveals were required from the beginning of the church. If we are in-

tent upon obeying Christ rather than men, we will subscribe to these same terms today, and in so doing, we can become Christians just like Peter, John, James, Paul, and all the others of the early church.

We are trying to be Christians only. We want to be the same thing religiously that the believers were in New Testament times, and we believe that this can be true for all of mankind. There is a great deal of confusion and lack of unity in religion today. We believe that if people will follow only what the Bible teaches, we can truly have unity. By disregarding the ideas of men and accepting and doing only what the Bible says we will be what Jesus died for — Christians — people who have had their sins forgiven — members of **His** church, not of a man-made church.

We want to serve you. We especially want to be of spiritual help, but we also want to do what we can in a physical way, too. We want to be your friend, both in good times and bad. You are always welcome to come and worship God with us. You will find yourself in the midst of imperfect people who want to please a perfect Savior.

How Much Do We Love the Church?

What kinds of thoughts come to your mind when you think about the church? Just what is the church, the church in the Bible?

The Scriptures do not portray the church as being just a group of religious people, but as that group that Peter calls “**God’s own special people**” (1 Peter 2:9). “*But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people...*”

In spite of the fact that there are many very fine, dedicated people in the multitude of denominations of today, the church of the Bible is the only one spoken of here by Peter. It is **the** church, **singular**. There were no parts, no denominations – only the one church which Jesus promised to build (Matthew 16:18).

Jesus loves the church dearly. Paul spoke to the elders from Ephesus about the love of Christ for the church in Acts 20:28: “*Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, over which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to feed the church of God*

which He purchased with His own blood.” Isaiah 53 and numerous other passages also tell of the great love which Jesus had for it.

Paul had a great love for the church. As we think carefully about our love for the church, recall with me a few comments from this noble apostle which tell us something of how much he loved the church. Let’s compare our love for the church with his when he says, *“I endure all things for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory”* (2 Timothy 2:10). He urged the elders from Ephesus, *“...remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears”* (Acts 20:31). Paul’s love and concern were for much more than just one congregation. After listing several of the sufferings which he had endured for Christ, he adds these very significant words – *“besides the other things, what comes upon me daily; my anxiety for all the churches* (congregations)” (2 Corinthians 11:28).

But Paul was not the only early Christian who loved the church. Many became martyrs; they gave their very lives for the church. Some, like Stephen and James, are specifically mentioned in the New Testament. I’ve been blessed by having the opportunity to go inside the great Colosseum in Rome where numerous early Christians became martyrs rather than to deny the Lord and His church. I’ve walked through the catacombs, those underground tombs just outside of Rome, where multitudes are buried because they loved the church and the Lord of the church enough to remain faithful and try to further His cause rather than to deny the faith.

Regardless of the tremendous love of Jesus, Paul, and a host of ancient Christians for the church, the compelling question that confronts each one of us is, **“How much do I (we) love the church?”** Brethren, here are some soul-searching questions that every member of the church needs to very soberly and seriously think about.

Do We Love the Church Enough to:

1. Present our bodies as a living sacrifice, as Paul urged in Romans 12:1?
2. Be willing to suffer ridicule and rejection in its behalf?

3. Sacrifice our personal comfort, etc., for the sake of the church?
4. Support it with our money, prayers, time, and talents?
5. Defend it against opposition, attacks from without and within?
6. Stand with Christ against the majority, even in the church, if necessary?

Could we ever be called upon to take such a stand in the church? I say this kindly, but to ask such a question is to reveal a lack of awareness of what is going on around us. Many Christians that I know personally are having their love for the church severely tested as a result of present conditions.

Brethren, it is imperative that every member of the Lord's church be determined to never forsake the Word of God and His desires for the desires and preferences of men! Paul told the Christians of Galatia some things that were not easy for him to say or for them to accept. As a result, he asked them in Galatians 4:16, "*Have I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth?*" Paul was willing to even lose friends, Christian friends, if necessary, for the sake of the church. How about us – do we love the church enough to make that much of a sacrifice if it should become appropriate? Brethren, we must love the church in the same manner that we are to love God — that is, "*with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength*" (Mark 12:30).

There's a Killer Among Us!

"Killer bees" and some wild animals known to be "killers" – such creatures can create fear in humans, sometimes even hysteria.

Of significantly more importance is the fact that even the church is susceptible to foes that can inflict catastrophic, sometimes even fatal, damage to the magnificent body of Christ. One of the church's most fearsome predators is that killer known as "**Apathy.**"

It's my sincere belief that apathy has killed more good efforts of all kinds than the outright opposition of strong physical en-

emies. In addition, it is highly likely that apathy has been at least as detrimental to success in the realm of religion as in any other.

Apathy translates into – “I just really don’t care,” whether we are talking about a cause, a person, or a concept.

Included in the immense damage that apathy inflicts to the cause of Christ is its smothering effect on many of our attempts to evangelize the lost.

What Can Cause Apathy Toward Evangelism?

(1) *Desire for acceptance and popularity.* Even in the church this desire can cause us to sacrifice what is *best* for what is *wanted*. This desire may cause us to be *overly* cautious about offending others with the Gospel.

(2) *Tolerance and broadmindedness.* The idea seems to be that “we have *our* faults,” and “they have *their* faults,” so we have no business trying to show to *them* that what *they* are practicing religiously is different from what the Bible teaches. To be “broadminded” has become a most treasured attribute, and to “tolerate” any and every doctrine and practice is viewed as being truly spiritual, when in reality it easily becomes just the opposite. As a result, too many in the church are willing to let evangelization of the world go lacking.

(3) *A growing spirit of universalism.* As unfortunate as it is, there are some, even in leadership roles, who are no longer sure that the **lost are really lost**. Much of what has been black and white from the first century has now become gray. The emphasis becomes, “We are all God’s children.”

(4) *Attitude toward the distinctiveness of the church.* If we fail to see the difference between Christ’s church and those of man’s creation, there is no point in evangelizing the world with the message of salvation, because that message inherently tells of the one church which Jesus built, the one to which those who are being saved are added.

(5) *Lack of commitment & conviction.* To a large extent, the Lord’s church is not displaying a commitment equivalent to that of some of Christianity’s greatest foes, resulting in an evangelistic

effort which is definitely inferior. Effective evangelism occurs only when there is a strong belief in the evangel, the Gospel message. Paul declared with conviction, *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek”* (Romans 1:16). He further voiced his commitment in 1 Corinthians 9:16, *“For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!”*

Apathy in evangelism can be conquered if we can come to understand what Christianity is really all about. We must see that we are not our own, but that we truly *“have been bought with a price”* (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). We must move from *selfishness* to *sympathy*, sympathy for those who are still lost in sin. It isn’t hard at all to get people to give a great deal of themselves in rescue efforts to find a lost child, and that is indeed as it should be. Now, just imagine what would result if we, the church of Christ, would emulate that same passion and urgency in an effort to rescue the lost souls of the world!

In 2 Corinthians 5 Paul reveals at least part of his motivation for evangelism. He was impressed with the coming judgment: *“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ”* (verse 10), and this of course applied to both him and his hearers. However, he also testified that his evangelism resulted because he was so affected by the love of Christ. Paul adamantly declared what is the only acceptable response to the love of Christ by those who claim to be His – *“and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again”* (verse 15, emphasis added).

A deep love for someone will cause us to do exceptional things for the benefit of that one whom we love, and those who truly love the Lord will not have to struggle in determining how much to do for Him and His cause. The killer **Apathy** will itself have been killed by **Love**.

Ministers = Who Are They?

Have you noticed that the term “minister” has become the commonly used identification of those who formerly were identified simply as “preachers” or “gospel preachers”? It is noticeable in the majority of advertisements in newspapers and brotherhood publications, in telephone directories, in church bulletins, on business cards, in introductions, and in conversation. Some may ask, “Is there a problem with this?” I believe there might be.

It is not necessary to get into a detailed analysis of each Greek word used in the New Testament and translated in English as “minister,” either as a noun or a verb. Suffice it to say that the Greek words generally denote the concept of a servant, an attendant, a worker, or the action carried out by such a person or persons. In other words, New Testament “ministers” were basically people engaged in some kind of eservice. Even casual reading of the New Testament introduces one to the fact that every Christian, every disciple of Jesus Christ, is intended to be a “minister,” a servant. For the sake of brevity, let me just refer you to Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12. These great chapters show quite clearly that the whole church is made up of parts that are intended to function, serve, work, or “minister” as a unit. Each part is different, but each has a function to fulfill. In doing his/her segment of the work, each member of the church, the body, is working (ministering) as a minister.

Many times today the preacher is identified as the minister of the Main Street congregation (or whatever name is appropriate). If every Christian is a minister, the preacher is not **the** minister of that congregation with which he works, or else the others in that congregation are failing to be what Christ expects them to be. It is highly unlikely that there is a congregation anywhere with only one minister. Even if such a situation were found, it might not be the preacher who was the minister – it might well be some other person in the group who more completely measured up to the biblical designation of a minister of Christ.

The terms “minister,” “ministry,” and “ministering” are used in a variety of ways in the New Testament. It is very true that there are many references to preachers as ministers, but non-preachers are just as accurately and appropriately identified as ministers. It is noteworthy that diverse groups of Christians were sometimes called ministers. Such is the case in Hebrews 6:10, where the writer is speaking to a large group of Christians in general, and he refers to their having “ministered” unto other folks. Peter, in writing to a large and diverse group of Christians, referred to the ministering and serving of them all (1 Peter 4:10). Paul indicated, in Romans 15:27, that the Gentile converts in Macedonia and Achaia would be ministering, acting as ministers, as they gave of their money to help relieve the financial needs of poor Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

Women were clearly called ministers in the New Testament. Examples include Peter’s mother-in-law in Matthew 8:15; many women in Matthew 27:55; and several women in Luke 8:3.

It is interesting to find that people can even be ministers without realizing it. Paul tells us that governing authorities are actually ministers of God (Romans 13:1-7). I think it is pretty obvious that some of them are not aware of that fact, but it is a fact, nevertheless.

With few exceptions, the New Testament speaks of ministers and ministering in a broad sense, including and involving **all Christians**, not just those who minister primarily by preaching the Word. Every Christian is to be a minister. Each one is to serve (minister) in every way that is approved and intended by God, both males and females, young and old, greatly talented and not so talented. Most of us will never be a preacher in the usual sense of the word, and there is nothing wrong with that, but each and every Christian is to be a minister of and for Christ.

There is certainly nothing unscriptural or wrong for the preacher to be referred to as a minister, for such he is, but since all who are truly Christians are ministers as well, wouldn’t it be better, wiser, and more biblical not to restrict the term “minister” just to those who are public ministers of the Word?

Again, it is true that there are different Greek words that are translated “minister” in the New Testament, and there are slightly different meanings for these words at times. However, it is indeed fair and accurate to summarize the use of “minister” in the New Testament to refer to those who are **servants** in some way for someone or some cause. May every Christian be busy serving the Lord as His faithful minister.

God's Priests Today

Peter was one of the Lord's bravest and most vocal followers, yet he denied the Lord three times, even with an oath. Peter was a great servant of Christ, but he had some maturing to do.

In his more mature years Peter penned these words, “*You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a **holy priesthood**, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ...But you are a chosen generation, a **royal priesthood**, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light*” (1 Peter 2:5,9).

We need to restore this teaching regarding the priesthood in the church today. In general, we make very little application of this New Testament doctrine.

The Concept of Priests Has Been Neglected

We seldom talk about priests in the church. We may talk about various church members being a teacher, an elder, a sacrificing servant, a preacher, a song leader etc., but we could talk all day and the thought of the role of a Christian as a priest would likely never come up.

We don't have a very good picture of a “priesthood” in our minds. The word “priest” makes us think of the blood sacrifices that the priests offered under the Law of Moses, and we don't like blood or burned meat.

We think of those who wear their collars backward and take confessions of sins from people, standing between those people and

their God. In our minds, **those** religions have priests, not the Lord's church, not the church we read about in the New Testament.

However, according to Peter, who was inspired by the Holy Spirit in what he wrote, the priesthood of Christians is a scriptural truth that we must live.

The Concept of Priests Can Be Understood

Old Testament priests were consecrated to God. They were set apart to do service for God. They were required to be clean, separate from all defilement, clothed in the priestly garments of holiness and righteousness.

The priests of long ago went into God's presence in behalf of the people. They stood between the people and God – they could enter the tabernacle or temple, but the people could not. As a part of the “*royal priesthood*,” the Christian has no one who stands between him or her and the Father. Christians, as priests, have direct access to the throne – “*For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father*” (Ephesians 2:18).

Priests of old served the people by offering their gifts before God. God has never allowed anyone but priests to offer sacrifices. As priests today, we do not offer up sacrifices of the bodies of animals — rather, our sacrifices are to be **our own bodies**. Paul made this clear in Romans 12:1, “*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you **present your bodies** a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.*”

No one offers sacrifices for us. We must do our own studying, thinking, believing, obeying, and serving.

The Concept of Priesthood Can Be Applied

The New Testament concept of the priesthood can be applied to our daily lives. Being a priest has always required holiness. An unholy man could not be a priest, and neither can we be a priest today if we are unholy. Remember Paul's words in Romans 12:1, “... *present your bodies a living sacrifice, **holy, acceptable to God**...*”

This priesthood concept can also be applied to our worship.

A priest worships. Sometimes folks sit and think about a worship service that has taken place, and they may think to themselves, “The preacher did a good job...the song leader did better than he usually does...the prayer leaders led some nice prayers...” We are like spectators — somebody else sings, preaches, prays...and we evaluate. However, priesthood requires action, participation. The Bible says, “*Therefore by Him (Christ) let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased*” (Hebrews 13:15,16).

Friends, a critically important point needs to be made. In Ezra 2:62 we have a record of some who were claiming to be priests, but who were excluded or expelled because they did not meet the qualifications. We all need to ask ourselves, “Am I fully qualified? Is there any way that I could be disqualified as a priest? Am I truly serving as a priest?”

As priests, we must each one be personally and actively involved in worship and the Lord’s work. Otherwise, we are unfaithful priests and risk being eternally rejected.

We Are Indeed Debtors

We have been impressed with the strong sense of duty which Paul felt regarding sharing the message of salvation with others just as the Lord Himself had so lovingly done for him. The apostle wrote, “*I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise*” (Romans 1:14).

I most definitely do not want to minimize the importance of that indebtedness of which Paul wrote, but I would like to briefly extract his words “*I am a debtor*” from that context and use them to try to help us think with great gratitude about others to whom we are indebted in a different way.

As Christians, we owe so much to so many. Surely we think immediately of **God**. Certainly we are forever indebted to that one who “*so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that*

whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). Perhaps we remember with tears that *"God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us"* (Romans 5:8). And we are awed as we *"Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!"* (1 John 3:1). How can we ever repay such love and mercy?!

Obviously, we owe an awesome debt to **Jesus**, the only one who could complete the plan of redemption as outlined by the Father. Paul said that Jesus gave up equality with God in order that He might become a lowly servant — all because of His desire to save mankind from the just reward for sin (Philippians 2:5-8). This fact is driven home with force in Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 8:9, *"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich."* The debt we owe to Jesus is increased by His having left us an example so that we may follow in His steps (1 Peter 2:21).

The third personality of the Deity, the **Holy Spirit**, has also brought about a great indebtedness on our part. It was the Spirit who *"moved"* the biblical penmen to write those inspired words that can guide us from earth to heaven (2 Peter 1:21). In addition, it is *"the Spirit who also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered"* (Romans 8:26). Most assuredly, we are deeply indebted to the Holy Spirit for His great help to us.

We also owe a great debt to a host of others besides the godhead. Just think of those **ancient stalwarts of the faith** who left us such an example of courage and conviction, saints who were ready to literally give up their lives rather than compromise their commitment to Christ. Consider, too, those **Christians of earlier generations** in our own country who sacrificed greatly in many ways to establish and promote the church in our land. The church of the present is indeed debtor to the church of past generations.

How can we ever repay the debt we owe to **those who taught us** the way of the Lord? Surely our gratitude should be shown by our living in obedience to His will and by our caring for others as these have cared for us.

In thinking about those to whom we are indebted, we must think of those **elders** who have given of themselves to “*watch for (our) souls*” (Hebrews 13:17). It is truly an awesome responsibility that they have accepted, especially in view of the fact that they must one day “*give account*” for each of us. It behooves us all to live in such a manner that they may be able to give their accounts “*with joy and not with grief*.”

It should be obvious that we are also indebted to those **preachers and teachers** who have given of themselves in our behalf, who have loved us enough to try to spur us on and not give up, who have faithfully admonished us to “*be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord*,” knowing that our “*labor is not in vain in the Lord*” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

It is only right that we add to our list the folks who are **faithful examples** of Christian living for us; those **encouragers** whose words and pats on the shoulder help us more than they realize; and on and on we could go.

Like Paul, we surely are debtors to those who still need to hear the Gospel. However, may we always also remember the many others to whom we are indebted, those who have contributed to our hope for eternity.



Messages of Truth

Section Six

Truth and Commitment

A Most Unforgettable Character

Every miracle is great, but to give sight to one born blind just seems to be extra special. John chapter 9 tells of Jesus having done that very thing.

It is important that we take note in verse 1 that the man was blind from birth. Jesus took pity on the man and anointed his eyes with clay and told him to go wash his eyes in the pool of Siloam. At the end of verse 7 John very matter of factly states that the man did as he was instructed, and *he came back seeing.*” How remarkable that such a miracle could be described with no fanfare whatsoever!

Verse 10 records the beginning of what may well have been the most questions that had ever been asked of this man who up to now was just “that blind beggar,” but who now has become the center of attention. The people asked how he had been made able to see, and he told them exactly what had taken place.

It appears that the people soon reached a point where they felt that the situation was too much for them, so they took the man to the Pharisees (verse 13). The Pharisees proceeded to ask him the same question. “*How did you receive your sight?*” The man’s answer was simple and to the point — “*He put clay on my eyes, and I washed, and I see*” (verse 15).

Some of the Pharisees said that Jesus could not possibly be from God, having violated the Sabbath by doing this act on the Sabbath. However, other Pharisees were honest enough to question how such a miracle could be performed by a sinner. Thus, there was a significant division among them (verses 14 and 16).

The next move by the Jews was to quiz the parents of the man, doubting that he had actually been born blind (verse 18ff.). This poor man had been unable to see all of his life, but we now find that he had another major problem — his parents loved their standing in the synagogue much more than they loved him (verse 22). Refusing to get involved, they chose instead to just throw their own son to the Pharisee wolves — “*He is of age; ask him*” (verses

21 and 23). The Jews then confronted the man, trying to intimidate him, telling him to glorify God by denying that this so-called sinful man, Jesus, performed this miracle (verse 24), but he was relentless.

Verse 25 is indeed a jewel! This fellow may not have had much education, but he displayed an ability to determine what is really important — “*One thing I know; that though I was blind, now I see.*” This marks the beginning of a progression of boldness and courage, even aggressiveness, as the man grows more and more weary of their refusal to face the facts and admit that Jesus actually gave him his sight. He is astounded by their admission that they don’t even know where Jesus is from, yet He performed this great miracle (verses 29 and 30)!

This incredible man even proceeds to preach a short sermon to the Jewish leaders, thought by many to be the Sanhedrin itself (verses 30-33). His lack of fear is amazing, and he shows himself to be a man of some understanding of God. The man’s disregard for the leaders and his audacity in speaking derisively to them certainly did not go unnoticed by those proud leaders. Their immediate reaction to his little sermon was to cast him out (verse 34).

Up to this point this man had lived his entire life in complete physical darkness, but he didn’t have much trouble at all in coming to see Jesus for who He really was, that is, “*the light of the world*” (verse 5).

This was an honest man. He was willing to change his thinking when confronted with additional information. Notice the progression of his faith. In verse 11 he simply refers to Jesus as “*A man called Jesus.*” In verse 17 he called Jesus “*a prophet.*” After Jesus explained that He was the Son of God, verse 38 says the man told Jesus, “*Lord, I believe!*” He then proceeded to worship Him. This was indeed a man of character.

Some Lessons for Us

(1) This man born blind came to see things that others were blinded to. The more he was exposed to Jesus, the more impressed he was. The more he saw and heard from Jesus, the more convinced

he was of the greatness, the uniqueness, and the divinity of Jesus. (2) This man gave us a most impressive example of courage to stand for right and against wrong. (3) He further displayed an unusual willingness to embrace truth.

I, for one, am deeply grateful for this most unforgettable Bible character!

Religious Strictness

During a recent visit with a friend of mine, he referred to a religious group in our area that is considered to be rather quaint in their beliefs and practices. He then added something like this: “They are very strict, much like the ‘Church of Christ.’” I’m confident that he didn’t say this as either a criticism or a compliment — it was merely his honest personal observation and assessment.

I have since thought about my friend’s comment several times. From my perspective, I certainly would not equate our beliefs and practices with those of the religious body to which he likened us. I believe that my friend lacks a sufficient understanding of the Lord’s church; otherwise, his assessment would be somewhat different from what he stated.

While my feelings were not all favorable with respect to my friend’s comment, I did feel good that he at least understands that the church of Christ does exercise some degree of religious strictness. I’m glad that he does not perceive us as teaching, endorsing, or condoning just any and every doctrine or practice that comes along. He knows that we are trying to adhere to what the Bible says, rather than polling the community or society in general prior to determining what we will sanction or approve. He sees that we are more restrictive and less moderate in our interpretation and application of the Scriptures than his own religious group.

Neither the church nor any individual Christian has authority to make any compromises relative to any commands or guidelines outlined in God’s Word. To be uncompromising in this regard

should be viewed as commendable; however, it is not uncommon for such a stance to result in Christians (or the church as a whole) being classified as “hard-nosed” or “obstinate.”

Just a casual reading of the New Testament would be sufficient to reveal that the apostle Paul was definitely uncompromising, both before and after becoming a Christian. However, it is also evident that he was a very passionate and compassionate person. Please note an episode recorded in Acts chapter 20. Verses 17-38 record a meeting that Paul had with the elders of the church from Ephesus. Among other things, he tells them in verse 25 that they will not see him again during his or their lifetime. He then states, *“Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God”* (verses 26-27).

Observation: Paul readily admits to having been uncompromising with respect to the faithful declaration of the **whole** (the **entire**) counsel (inspired Word) of God. This staunch proclaimer of the truth used some of his closing words to these church shepherds to warn that very soon various brethren, even some of them, would depart from the truth and bring in destructive heresies and perverse teachings (verses 28-30). Notice now the tenderness and compassion of Paul that is exposed in verse 31: *“Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.”* Surely we cannot fail to be drawn to the compassion and caring of this man of God who was also so unwilling to compromise God’s Word. He was unrelenting in faithfully preaching the will of God, but he also grieved deeply when others could not or refused to see the divine revelation.

Those elders from Ephesus knew Paul well, and their reaction to what he said to them is recorded in verses 36-38: *“And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. Then they all wept freely, and fell on Paul’s neck and kissed him, sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more. And they accompanied him to the ship.”*

This look at Paul should serve as a pattern for the church in how to keep our “strictness” equivalent to that of God. We are not at liberty to either loosen or tighten the bonds of Scripture (Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32; Revelation 22:18-19). Paul declared that we are to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), making it clear that attitude and motive are critically important in practicing religious strictness. This is further borne out by his inspired admonition in Galatians 6:1, *“Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.”* Paul repeatedly teaches the necessity of our avoiding and calling attention to sinful practices, yet he never even hints that doing so with a belligerent manner is acceptable to the Lord.

May God help us to do our best to be strict to the same degree and in the same manner as commanded by the Bible and exemplified by Paul.

“...But As For Me And My House...”

Surely we have all been impressed with some of the statements made by outstanding statesmen of the world in times past. Included among the more notable ones are Patrick Henry’s “Give me liberty or give me death,” Winston Churchill’s “I have nothing to give but blood, sweat, and tears,” and Henry Clay’s “I’d rather be right than be President.” Such words of commitment and exhortation have helped countries and causes to be victorious instead of suffering defeat.

As great as these proclamations of courage and dedication were and are, they do not measure up to the significance of many declarations found in the Bible. It would be hard to find one more inspiring than a statement by Joshua in his farewell speech to the people of God just before his death. In Joshua chapter 24 the faithful leader of the Israelites reminds them of all that God had done for them and their ancestors, delivering them from their enemies

and providing all their needs for them, including a special land in which to live. He then proceeds to tell them that they have a great decision to make; are you going to serve pagan gods, as your fathers did at times, or are you going to render loyal service to the God who has delivered you and lovingly provided for you? Then, in the last part of verse 15, Joshua makes this great statement of commitment, dedication, and determination — “**...but as for me and my house, we will serve Jehovah.**”

Joshua was able to make this remarkable declaration because of his great love for God, his Israelite brethren, and his family. His words were prompted by his deep gratitude to the Lord for all that He had done for Joshua and all those he loved. Surely more of us would join with Joshua in these words if we understood what Joshua understood. Surely few of us would drift very far away from the Lord while fully comprehending all that He has done for us and continues to do for us.

It's one thing to make a commitment for ourselves, but it's quite another thing to make a commitment for others. How could Joshua speak for his family when he said, “*...but as for me **and my house**...*”? He could do so in the sense that he was determined to do all within his power to see to it that his family members were as committed to faithfully serving the Lord as he was. His loved ones still had the freedom of choice; they could become like pagan nations around them if they so chose, but it would not happen without his having made every possible effort to get them to share his deep love and gratitude for God.

Many more husbands and fathers need to follow Joshua's example. An alarming number of families, even Christian families, are in great need of spiritual repair. God has given the husbands and fathers the major responsibility in such matters, as is clearly shown in Ephesians 5:22 – 6:4.

Perhaps there is an even greater need for more elders and preachers who will fearlessly take their stand with Joshua and echo his commitment. It is a very elementary fact that no group, religious or otherwise, will ever succeed beyond the level of its leadership.

The church of the Lord absolutely must have men as its leaders who will duplicate the determination of Joshua to stand with and for God, regardless of the opposition, even if the opposition should sometimes come from within the church itself. Satan will never make it easy for God's people to loyally serve the Lord, and at times he even uses some of God's own people, as was true in Bible times, to lead the church astray. As a result, there is perhaps a greater need then ever before for elders who will lovingly and boldly live up to the words of such notable passages as Acts 20:28-31; 1 Timothy 3:4,5, and Titus 1:9-16. Preachers, too, are called to be faithful to the admonitions of such passages as 2 Timothy 4:1-5 and Titus 2:1, just to name a few.

Knowing that each one of us will one day be called before the Lord in judgment, dare we live our lives now with less of a commitment to Him and His Word than that of His loyal servant Joshua? May God's children everywhere dedicate themselves fully to Him and to the furtherance of His great cause here on the earth. Let's be sure that God can depend on us.

Silence = Both Soothing and Deafening

Isn't silence wonderful at times! It just seems as though there are times when our ears can get tired, just like our arms, legs, and back. After being bombarded with excessive noise, the soothing effect of silence can become a highly treasured blessing. In His humanity, even Jesus encountered this feeling. The Bible records various instances of His leaving the crowds for the opportunity to recuperate from the stress and turmoil in solitude and silence. He cherished those times when He could separate Himself from the multitudes and commune in quietness with the Father. Jesus urged His apostles to follow His example, as in Mark 6:30-32. Yes, silence can most assuredly be an oasis in the desert of life.

It is strangely true, however, that silence can sometimes be just as deafening as it is soothing at other times. There most definitely are times when silence is not what is needed, when it is totally inappropriate. This is verified by the wise and inspired words of Solomon when he said that there is “*a time to keep silence, and a time to speak*” (Ecclesiastes 3:7). Nevertheless, this raises the significant problem of determining when to be silent and when to speak. Please consider with me some situations in which the Scriptures call for our silence to be broken.

In the 30th Psalm, David reacts to the goodness of God in delivering him from trouble. David gratefully says, “*I will extol You, O Lord, for You have lifted me up... To the end that my glory may sing praise to You and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks to You forever*” (verses 1 and 12). In addition, he urges all of God’s children to “*Sing praise to the Lord, you saints of His, And give thanks at the remembrance of His holy name*” (verse 4). The New Testament urges the same response to the goodness of God: “***Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name***” (Hebrews 13:15). The children of God must never be silent regarding the praise that is due to Him.

May the silence be broken by our standing up for what is right. Oh, that the Lord’s people today would echo the sentiments of Peter and John as they adamantly declared, “*Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard*” (Acts 4:19-20). This same commitment is greatly needed in the church now. Elders and preachers especially are called upon to lead the church in standing with the Lord, regardless of the unpopularity that can result. Should those in positions of leadership fail to break the silence and speak up for what is right, however, that will not excuse any of the rest of us from courageously standing with our true Leader. The church of today, if it is to duplicate the boldness and concern of the early church, must be able to say with Paul, “*For I have not shunned to declare to you all the counsel of God*” (Acts 20:27).

Let us also never allow the existence of the deafening silence, which occurs when Christians fail to stand against that which is wrong. Standing *for* the right and standing *against* the wrong are indeed closely related, but they are not exactly the same. True conviction and courage are required in both situations, but I believe that it requires even greater fortitude and defiance of danger to speak out in opposition to that which is wrong. With today's spirit of tolerance, most anything can be advocated without the threat of reprisal or social rejection. It's usually allowed in the name of "the freedom of speech."

Breaking the silence by openly opposing something or someone is quite another matter. Many in the world, as well as some even in the church, are generally exceptionally tolerant, but their tolerance becomes intolerance toward any who dare to speak up in an effort to show that an idea, a philosophy, or an action is in violation to God's will. What are Christians to do? Are we to compromise the truth in order to "get along"? Certainly not! We must speak with both our actions and our words in opposition to those things which God Himself opposes. We can know what those are by reading His Book. Silence can indeed be golden, but it also is sometimes just plain yellow.

Silence can be either soothing or deafening, depending on the situation. May we all courageously and boldly stand both for the truth and against error, but let us always "*speak the truth in love*" (Ephesians 4:15).

Competition and Victory

I read once about an outstanding college football player who later played professional football. After his college graduation, his coach asked for his help in recruiting some players for the school. He asked the coach just what kind of players he wanted him to recruit to play there. The coach said, "Well, Mike, you know, there are some players that, when they get knocked down, they just stay down." Mike said, "We don't want that kind, do we, Coach?!" The coach replied, "No, Mike, we don't want that kind."

The coach then said, “You know, Mike, there are some other guys that, when they get knocked down, they get back up, you knock them down again, but they don’t get up again.” Mike said, “We’re not looking for that kind of players either, are we, Coach?” The coach answered, “No, Mike, that’s not the kind of players we are looking for.”

Then the coach said, “You know, Mike, there are some other players that get knocked down and get up, get knocked down again, and get up again, and get knocked down again, and get up again.” Mike’s enthusiasm and football toughness and competitiveness started really coming alive, and he said, “**That’s** the kind of player we’re looking for, isn’t it, Coach?!” The coach responded, “**No, Mike, it isn’t. We’re looking for the guy who is knocking everybody down!**”

In the game of football, regardless of the age level and the level of competition involved, we do want the guys who can knock everybody else down. We may even want to BE those guys! But, when it comes to spiritual matters, God isn’t looking for that kind of performer, is He? The Lord doesn’t want or need folks whose motive is to flatten every spiritual foe. There is much more to the “game” of eternal life than the merciless destruction of everyone who may get in our path as we strive for the victory.

Satan is the one who is busy trying to knock everyone down! *“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour”* (1 Peter 5:8). He is fearless and intimidating! But in spite of his strength and agility, and in spite of his determination to defeat us, we cannot afford to be like the football players who get knocked down and just stay down.

The devil will win easily if we are willing to accept defeat because he sometimes knocks us off our feet and we just stay down, unwilling to get back up and try harder the next time. We will definitely be losers if we don’t compete better than that.

What God wants is people who will keep on getting back up each time Satan knocks them down. The Bible provides us with numerous examples of folks who have been knocked off their feet by Satan, but who were sufficiently motivated and determined to get back up and continue to compete, even victoriously.

Just as players on a football team are able to encourage and motivate their teammates by their own determination and grit, especially in the face of adversity, so should we also be strengthened by the recorded examples of those characters of courage and resolve that we read about in the Bible. Is not our battle made easier for us as we compare our strife with Satan with what men of God like David, Joseph, Peter, Paul, and so many others refused to give in to?

Satan has never been known to compete fairly! The devil is wily (Ephesians 6:11); he is the ultimate deceiver (2 Corinthians 11:14-15); he is the liar of all liars (John 8:44); he is subtle and fraudulent (Acts 13:10); he is a murderer (John 8:44); and he is full of perversion (Acts 13:10).

Paul wrote a lot about the battle with Satan and the fact that it is a constant thing, but he proved that it is possible for us to win! He wrote, “*We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed...*” (2 Corinthians 4:8-9). His words in Romans 10:31 should also serve to keep us getting back up: “...*If God is for us, who can be against us?*”

Even when Satan knocks us down in death, God will enable us to get up one more time. “...*knowing that He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus, and will present us with you*” (2 Corinthians 4:14). Indeed, “...*we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us*” (Romans 8:37). Let us rejoice with Paul as he leads us in the anthem of thanksgiving and praise, “*But thanks be to God, who gives us the **victory** through our Lord Jesus Christ*” (1 Corinthians 15:57)!

“There Is a Famine in the Land”

Many centuries ago God spoke through His prophet Hosea and said, “*My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge*” (Hosea 4:6). There is no doubt at all as to what kind of knowledge He had in mind. He became quite specific when He stated that the people had “*forgotten the law of your God.*” Could it also be said by the Lord

that His people today are lacking in the knowledge of His law? The answer is painfully obvious.

The church of Christ is currently experiencing much of the same turmoil and unrest that is presently troubling many other religious groups. Instead of the cry — “What does the Bible have to say?” — the frequently-heard call is — “This is what we want. Others are doing this and we want to, too.”

It may well be that if the Great Physician were to examine His patients and consider the symptoms, His diagnosis would be, “You are suffering from spiritual malnutrition. It is no wonder that you weaken and tire so easily — you are not taking in enough spiritual nourishment to provide the strength and vitality necessary for adequate spiritual health.” Without partaking of enough of the “bread of life” (God’s Word) to sustain us, we are going to be susceptible to becoming infected with ailments that we would otherwise be able to withstand if only we had been inoculated with the preventive powers of the inspired Word of our Physician.

However, it isn’t enough to just identify a problem and then forget about it. We must initiate a plan for controlling the problem, if not totally eliminating it.

Every Christian must first of all accept personal responsibility for his or her own spiritual condition. We must acknowledge the fact that we make our own choices, including those choices relative to whether we grow spiritually, whether we develop and mature spiritually. Our diet must give preference to that which is pure and unadulterated, so that we “*may grow thereby unto salvation*” (1 Peter 2:2).

The apostle John urged, “*Beloved do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world*” (1 John 4:1). Reflecting upon this admonition causes us to wonder just how we might be able to test or try the “spirits” (teachers, etc.) as to whether they are truly of God. Without any desire to be unkind or insulting, the answer is very simple. It is found in Acts 17:11, where many Jews of Berea “*were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the*

Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.” There’s the answer. These Bereans were not even Christians yet, but prior to their conversion to Christ, they were “testing” or “trying” the spirits, the spirits in this instance being Paul and Silas (verse 10).

The New Testament contains much teaching that each one of us will be held individually accountable for our life. Notice particularly Paul’s declaration in 2 Corinthians 5:10: *“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in his body, according to what he has done, whether it is good or bad.”*

In spite of the truth just stated, those who are elders, or shepherds, or overseers, will have to give an account not only for themselves, but, in addition, they will bear the awesome responsibility of having to give an account for those under their care, as is shown in Hebrews 13:17: *“Obey those who have the rule over you, and submit yourselves, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account...”* These men are to *“Shepherd the flock”* and serve *“as overseers”* (1 Peter 5:2). They are to *“take care of the church of God”* (1 Timothy 3:5b).

Elders, do you know your teachers and preachers, **really** know them? Do you know what they believe regarding matters of doctrine? Do you know, **really** know, what the teachers teach? Do you and your fellow elders frequently attend the various classes to observe both the teachers and students? If a teacher is found to be teaching error, or at least planting questionable ideas in the minds of class members, is this matter dealt with by the elders?

It may well be that there has never been a greater need for conscientious and godly elders than exists today. We need to pray fervently that God will give us mighty men of valor who will *“stand in the gap”* (Ezekiel 22:30) and faithfully feed the flock and constantly guard the flock from any potential danger.

Christians, let’s feed on God’s Word in order that we may be spiritually healthy; and elders, please help us all to be fed appropriately while assembled together for study and worship.

Are We Willing to Pay the Price?

Jesus invites all mankind to come to Him, to be His followers, (Matthew 11:28-30). But He does more than *invite*, He *calls* us. He doesn't just extend a casual invitation; rather, He asks, entreats, implores. He truly *wants* everyone to accept His invitation. Unlike so many others, though, Jesus is totally honest and forthright. He tells us right at the beginning that there is a price to pay if we accept His invitation.

Since there is a cost, we need to count that cost before making our commitment to Jesus. However, we may have already become a follower of His before realizing just what would be involved in such a relationship. Whatever our situation is, we need to periodically "count the cost," reminding ourselves of our part of the agreement that we made with Him. We may find ourselves asking, "Am I willing to pay the price?" If we are not, we need to consider what our alternatives, if any, are.

The cost of being Jesus' disciples is spelled out for us by Jesus Himself in such passages as Matthew 16:24-26; Mark 8:34-38; Luke 9:23-26, 57-62; 14:25-33. After carefully reading these Scriptures, we must ask: "Am I willing to **deny myself, take up my cross** (even daily), and **follow Him**?"

Among other things, one who follows Jesus is subject to ridicule, rejection, misrepresentation, disappointment, and discouragement. **(1) Ridicule** is likely one of the more difficult things that a Christian is called upon to endure. No one likes to be the subject of sarcasm, disdain, contempt, scorn, or mockery — but this sometimes comes with identifying oneself with Jesus Christ, who Himself was subjected to much more reproach than any of us will ever witness. **(2) Rejection.** Trying to live like and for Jesus can sometimes cause us to be cast out by former friends and associates, relatives, co-workers, etc. Our task then is to decide who is most important to us. In deciding, it is well for us to remember that Jesus said His followers must put Him first, ahead of friends, material goods, even our dearest family members. **(3) Misrepresentation.** Isn't it hard when folks depict us in ways that are unfair and unjust! Yet, Jesus became very familiar

with this kind of treatment, and He said that “*a disciple is not above his teacher; nor a servant above his master*” (Matthew 10:24). **(4) Disappointment** is part of following Jesus. People and events occasionally (or even frequently) disappoint us in that we don’t always see the traits of Jesus in others, and we don’t understand when it seems that God is no longer really in charge. He seems to be allowing bad people to be in control and bad things to happen. **(5) Discouragement.** It most certainly can be disheartening and discouraging when we see that good does not always prevail over evil, when we see even our brethren in Christ at times not living as they should, yet they often times are more accepted and highly regarded than others who are trying hard to live as Jesus teaches in His Word. Yes, if we are truly His followers, we will even suffer persecution. “*Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution*” (2 Timothy 3:12).

Following Jesus involves a cross — **our** cross. It involves surrender, and this is never easy. It is always difficult to forsake our own will in favor of the will of another, but Jesus says that this is part of the price. We cannot have the Christ of the cross without the cross of self-denial.

The devil is not going to allow it to be easy to serve the Lord (1 Peter 5:8; 1 Corinthians 10:12). This is part of the price to be paid. Let us remember, though, that we are not in this situation all by ourselves. The words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 ought to be a real source of encouragement and rejuvenation for the disciples of Christ. Paul says that God is the source of all comfort, giving comfort in the midst of tribulation. He even states that suffering can bring about consolation and salvation. Remember, too, that every temptation by Satan is accompanied by a way of escape, courtesy of God (1 Corinthians 10:13). In addition, Jesus has promised to be with His followers “*always, even to the end of the age*” (Matthew 28:20).

Yes, it does cost to be a Christian, and we need to consider that cost, but we need to also consider the cost of **not** being a Christian.

Christian friends, we made a commitment — let’s keep it. Non-Christian friends, you need desperately to make the commitment. You can keep it. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit will do their part in helping you to keep it. You can do it. Do it.

A black and white photograph of a hand holding a chess piece, with a microscope in the background.

Messages of Truth

Section Seven

Truth and God's Word

Principles and Direct Commands

It's true that we don't understand everything in the Bible, but we still **can** and **must** hold to the principle that the Bible is God's inspired Word, and that it is our only authority. This principle is made clear by such Scriptures as Matthew 28:18, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, and 2 Peter 1:20-21. Adhering to and abiding by this major principle will help us to more consistently let God guide us in making our decisions and choices.

In those times when we are unsure about a question, a doctrine, or a practice, we must cling to what we already know from the Scriptures which may have application to the matter under consideration.

It has often been said that "the Bible is its own best commentary." It is critically important that we realize that any part of the Bible must be understood in relation to the overall teaching of the Bible. We see from 2 Timothy 3:16-17 that the Scriptures claim to provide for man everything that he needs for his religious instruction. The Bible cannot be what it claims to be and be self-contradictory. It cannot make conflicting pronouncements. It must agree with itself. This is one of those exceedingly important biblical principles.

The Bible Doesn't Say, "Thou Shalt Not. . ."

Sometimes it is contended that the absence of a specific command in the Bible that either prescribes or prohibits something gives us the liberty to deal with that matter in whatever way we choose — but the absence of a specific prohibition in the Bible never automatically allows an action. For example:

(1) Where does the Bible ever say, "*Thou shalt not engage in drug abuse*"? It doesn't ever mention drug abuse, but it does condemn such a practice... through biblical principles. For example, please read carefully those fundamental principles which are noted at the conclusion below.

(2) Where is the Bible verse that says, "*Thou shalt not use*

cookies and milk at the Lord's Supper”? No such verse can be found in the Bible, can it?! But, the absence of a direct condemnation in no way excuses or authorizes such a practice. The Lord's specification of the unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine that He wanted to be used automatically eliminates the need for any “Thou shalt not's” with respect to any other proposed elements.

Any number of other examples could be given, but again, the absence of such commands does not mean that these matters are totally ignored by Scripture. Any time that the Bible tells us what to do it inherently also tells us what not to do. Anything that is inconsistent with a biblical instruction regarding what to do cannot be acceptable to God.

Often prohibitions and positive commands are covered by broad principles, such as what we call “The Golden Rule” in Matthew 7:12, wherein the Lord Jesus said, *“Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”* It wouldn't take any of us very long to enumerate several situations where this principle of behavior would most definitely be applicable. Other such broad principles are found in the Bible, principles with a host of applications, but without a detailed list. The Lord expects His people to use common sense in making appropriate use of these general principles.

We must realize that the *principles* contained in the Bible reveal *much more* of what God deems as right or wrong than the *direct commands* that are recorded in the Bible. For the Bible to contain a special direct command governing everything that is either good or evil would require a volume so large that it would be difficult to even carry such a Bible!

Insisting on the citing of a specific verse which explicitly condemns something that we want to do is sometimes an effort to get freedom to do what we already know is questioned by many and is controversial in nature, but what we may very well plan to do regardless. This kind of thinking is somewhat reminiscent of the thinking and actions exhibited by some toward Jesus. Let's look at just three such instances:

(1) Luke 11:14-15 — (the seeking of another sign)

“And He was casting out a demon, and it was mute. So it was, when **the demon had gone out**, that **the mute spoke**; and **the multitudes marveled**. But some of them said, ‘He casts out demons by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons.’ Others, testing Him, **sought from Him a sign from heaven**” (emphasis added). Please notice that to some people only *one miracle* is insufficient as proof of identity, power, or authority.

(2) John 6:1-14, 22-30 — (immediately after witnessing Christ’s miracle of feeding 5,000)

“Therefore they said to Him, ‘What **sign** will You perform then, **that we may see it and believe You**? What **work** will You do?’” (emphasis added). It seems obvious that it would not have made any difference in those folks’ obedience had Jesus performed several more miracles. Their minds were already made up.

(3) Luke 16:19-31 — (the parable of the rich man and Lazarus)

The rich man and Lazarus were dead, and the rich man implored Abraham to send Lazarus to testify to his living brothers so that they could escape the place of torment. Notice verses 29-31: “Abraham said to him, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ But he said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, **neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead**’” (emphasis added).

The presence of a direct command or example doesn’t always make much more of an impact on us than more signs would have made on those who witnessed the miracles of Jesus or might have heard from the dead. If we refuse to follow basic Bible principles we will very possibly also ignore any direct commands as well.

A look again at just a few of the basic fundamental principles in the Bible that are relative to Christian behavior should be helpful.

* **1 Thessalonians 5:21-22** = “Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.”

* **1 Corinthians 6:19-20** = *“Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own. For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.”*

* **Ephesians 5:11** = *“And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them.”*

* **Ephesians 4:27** = *“...neither give place to the devil.”*

* **Philippians 1:9-10** = *“And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ.”*

* **1 Corinthians 10:31** = *“Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”*

In any quest for a loophole in an effort to do anything that is not clearly approved by God we should also give great consideration to the consequence of our example and influence as a Christian. Read carefully Matthew 5:16 and 18:6.

It would behoove us all to be more aware of and obedient to both the COMMANDS and PRINCIPLES contained in God’s Word.

Those Bereans and Thessalonians

A very notable verse of Scripture is found in Acts 17. Here we find Paul preaching to both Jews and Gentiles in Berea. Luke compliments the Bereans as he says in 17:11: *“These were more fair-minded (noble-KJV) than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.”* Notice that Luke calls them “noble” or “fair-minded,” and he bases his assessment of them on two actions taken by them:

(1) They *“received the Word with all readiness.”*

(2) They *“sought the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.”*

Now let's go over to 1 Thessalonians. Luke has just told us in Acts 17:11 that the Thessalonians didn't measure up to the Bereans. However, as we read Paul's letter to the Christians of Thessalonica, we must conclude that the comparison in Acts 17 was with the unbelieving Jews of Thessalonica, and not with those who became Christians there. I call your attention particularly to 1 Thessalonians 2:13; *"For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe."* Paul makes it very clear just why it is that he esteems them so highly — their acceptance of and attitude toward the Word of God, the Bible. Surely it is obvious that the church today needs to emulate those who became Christians in both Berea and Thessalonica by being careful students of God's Word. We owe it, both to ourselves and to the Lord, to weigh and measure all that we hear and read by the standard of the Bible.

Sometimes well-meaning folks may want to see some thing or idea implemented in a congregation, and when it is objected to, their defensive response may be, "What's wrong with it?" I want to kindly suggest that that is the wrong question. I believe that the more proper question would be, "Is it authorized by the Bible?" We must have biblical support for our beliefs and practices.

Those who preach and teach will certainly be held accountable for what they say (James 3:1). We as hearers are also responsible for comparing what we hear with what the Bible says on the subject. If the Bible endorses the teaching, we are obligated to accept it. If the teaching is in conflict with the Bible, we must reject it.

Most unfortunately, it continues to be true in the 21st century just as it was in the 1st century, that there are occasionally those who are not so well-meaning who come along with new doctrines and plans in an effort to gain followers for themselves, rather than for Christ. This is not merely a charge that comes from rash and harsh self-righteous judgmentalism — it is a factual reality borne out in Scripture. If we are faithful to the example of the Bereans and Thes-

salonians, we will already be familiar with the heart-rending warning that the apostle Paul stated regarding not only false teachers in general, but even regarding elders in the church, as he poured out his heart to the elders of the Ephesus congregation in Acts 20:27-31:

“For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.”

In the Old Testament both Isaiah (30:10) and Jeremiah (12:6) told of some folks who desired “*smooth words*.” We all like to hear those words that are smooth, that are soothing to our ears. We can sometimes eat something that really tastes great when we eat it, but it may cause indigestion for hours afterwards. Smooth words can likewise sound really great when we hear them, but they may cause us untold heartache later. The words of the Lord are truth, and are not always smooth.

I’m sure that many of us have heard the saying that “attitude determines altitude,” and there’s a lot of truth in that. Let me suggest that attitude will also determine our eternal destiny. This begins with our attitude toward God’s Inspired Word. May God help us all to be fully committed to letting the Bible be our sole authority in all matters pertaining to Christianity.

In Defense of Thomas

Ask most people who are familiar at all with the New Testament character named Thomas what they remember about him, and the answer will quite likely be that he was a doubter – he was “*Doubting Thomas*.” Writers of both the past and present have been

highly critical and accusative regarding this apostle of Jesus. Not only has he been classified as a doubter, he has been characterized as having been rather dull of mind and as being noted for his persistent pessimism and gloominess. Notice these two samples of published assessments of this man:

- “If ever a dismal, somber note was to be struck, you could depend on Thomas to strike it.”
- “Thomas is very much to be blamed for his unbelief, in that he compares very unfavorably with the rest of the Upper Room.”

One of the most highly treasured tenets of the American judicial system is that a person is presumed to be innocent until proven guilty. The jury is still out as to whether Thomas has been given the benefit of any doubt regarding his being guilty of being a “doubter.”

Hmmm. Is doubting all this man ever did? Did he always see the clouds and never the sunshine? Do the Scriptures not record anything else about Thomas? Does the Bible itself refer to him by this name?

This little essay is not an effort to prove that Thomas’ faith never wavered, but it is an effort to show that in spite of whatever weaknesses he had, Thomas was still a man of outstanding faith and courage, a man who at times exhibited more commitment than any of the other apostles. I believe that “Doubting Thomas” is hardly a fair assessment of his life as revealed in the Bible.

More than any other, the event that has resulted in the widespread critical assessment of Thomas is found in John 20:19-25. The setting is this: Jesus had been raised from the tomb on Sunday morning. That evening the disciples (apostles) were together, and Jesus unexpectedly joined them. He showed them His wounded hands and side. However, Thomas was not there — he was missing. When the other apostles told him later that they had seen Jesus, he responded: “*Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe*” (verse 25). This does sound rather incriminating, doesn’t it? However, why should he immediately accept their state-

ment as absolute proof? They had been mistaken about the appearance of Jesus when He walked upon the water of the Sea of Galilee (Matthew 14:22,23). Thomas might well think that they could be mistaken again.

Why had Thomas missed the meeting? The others were there. Why wasn't Thomas there? This is a fair question. Here is the only available biblical answer: The Bible doesn't tell us. Nothing at all is recorded as to Thomas' whereabouts while the others were with Jesus. Is it necessary to assume the worst possible reason for Thomas' absence? Yes, it is entirely possible that his faith was severely shaken, but it is also surely within the realm of possibility that he was engaged in a quite legitimate endeavor. We have no information at all as to what Thomas was doing at the time, why he was doing it, or where he was doing it. In spite of this total lack of information, countless writers and others have felt quite at liberty to speculate with considerable assertiveness as to why Thomas was missing from that assembly. Here are just a couple of the many critical claims that have been made as to why Thomas was not present;

- ✦ "If he had ever dreamed that Jesus would be there, of course he would not have missed it; but he expected the meeting to be a very dull affair."
- ✦ "He was missing because he had lost hope."

Isn't it sad that such severe statements are made based solely upon vivid imagination and groundless speculation?

It is noteworthy that the other apostles doubted before being presented with the same kind of evidence for the resurrection of Jesus that Thomas demanded. Before Thomas saw Jesus in the flesh on the following Sunday, they saw the wounds in His body. That is why they believed. Before they saw Him they were meeting behind doors that were closed because of their fear of the Jews (John 20:19). They were both fearful and unbelieving, yet only Thomas has come to be known almost exclusively as a doubter. They believed only after they saw the same evidence that Thomas demanded to see (20:20).

This same Thomas was apparently the only one of the twelve who voiced the courage and conviction to go with Jesus back to the area of Bethany and Jerusalem after the death of Lazarus, expressing a readiness and willingness to die an anticipated death with and for the Lord (John 11:1-16). I wonder why it wouldn't be at least as appropriate to call this man "Courageous Thomas."

Perhaps it would be more nearly correct to label Thomas as a *questioner* rather than a *doubter*. He deserves some consideration for his willingness to express his concerns and ask his questions while the others hid theirs in their silence. He wasn't too proud to admit his lack of knowledge and understanding. He has been criticized for his words to Jesus in John 14:5, where he admitted his confusion about what Jesus was saying, but please notice the words of Philip in verse 8, "*Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us.*" Philip certainly displayed a lack of perception after having been so closely associated with Jesus for nearly three years, yet he has not been "labeled" in a derogatory manner because of it, and that is as it should be.

Thomas appears to have been an independent thinker, one who possessed a searching mind. He seems to have been ready and willing to accept new information and new evidence. He was one who pursued further knowledge upon which to base his beliefs and his actions.

Thomas did not refuse to believe – he refused to accept as fact the resurrected Jesus without seeing the evidence for himself (John 20:25). Is that all bad? Should we not base our faith on the evidence rather than putting all of our trust in someone else's beliefs? Thomas was honest, his faith was indeed *his* faith, the result of personal thinking and examining. Reasonable doubt can result in greatly deepened faith.

Upon seeing the evidence, this man of God was not the least bit slow to acknowledge the reality of Jesus' resurrection. In fact, his immediate response upon seeing the resurrected wounded body of the Lord is surely the most memorable single declaration of faith in the deity of Christ found in the entire Bible — "***My Lord and my***

God!” (verse 28). How remarkable that this matchless exclamation came from the heart and lips of one who has been maligned for centuries as a weak and despondent doubter!

Thomas was, without a doubt, less than the Lord preferred him to be at times, just as were the other apostles, but he deserves to be remembered more for his heroic service and readiness to lay down his life for his Savior than for any temporary doubts that he may have had.

If only the church today were filled with servants of the caliber of this godly man!

God and His Word

The Bible tells us about a man names Jeroboam. Please notice this description of him in 1 Kings 11:28: *“And the man Jeroboam was a mighty man of valor; and Solomon saw the young man that he was industrious...”*

Wouldn’t it be wonderful to have been mentioned in the Bible in such an honorable way? Jeroboam was an outstanding young man. He was one who got people’s attention because of his excellent qualities. He was so admired by the people that they even made him their king!

However, it is quite noteworthy that Jeroboam came to be known as *“Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin.”* This statement is made about Jeroboam some 14 times in the Old Testament!

What happened? What changes occurred in his life to cause Jeroboam to become known for leading his own people, his nation, into sin? Here is the answer: *Jeroboam took it upon himself to change God’s instructions, God’s laws.* (Read 1 Kings 12:25-33.) Not even a king had the right to do such a thing.

Now let’s turn our attention away from Jeroboam and his terrible sin for a moment. What a great blessing we have in being able to read the Bible for ourselves and learn what God wants from us and for us. There is a problem that comes with this wonderful bless-

ing, though. The problem is that there is responsibility involved. Because God has made it possible for us to know His Word and His will, He expects us to take advantage of that opportunity. He has given us intellect, making us able to read and to understand what we read; He has given us the Bible, making it possible for us to know all that is necessary for us to please and honor Him.

We must be like the Bereans of Acts 17:11, who were not even Christians yet, but they understood the wisdom and necessity of verifying what they were being taught. Sure, it takes some time and effort to search the Scriptures. However, if our goal is to be pleasing to God, we will be more than willing to make the necessary investment of time and effort. We will do it because of our respect and love for Him, and we will also do it because of our determination to be correct in our understanding of Him and His Word. This is vitally important. Our eternity depends upon it!

It doesn't matter who it is that is doing the preaching or teaching. We still must search the Scriptures to see if what is being taught is so. If the Bible does support it, surely **we must** also.

The great apostle Paul knew that the **message**, not **the messenger**, is what is important. In 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 he said,

And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

God said, “*Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil*” (Exodus 23:2). What the majority think or do may very well influence **us**, but the **truth** is not influenced — it remains stable and immovable. It is so important that we allow ourselves to be led only by the truth and not by either the persuasive words of men or what the majority believes or desires.

Please do not misunderstand — not all who have the ability

to speak with great persuasiveness are doing so in an effort to lead anyone into error or away from God. Not at all. However, we need to realize that we are most vulnerable to being misled when listening to one who is a very gifted, powerful, and persuasive speaker. It is appropriate to admire and respect his ability, but we must be careful that we not allow ourselves to assume that just because he says a thing, and says it very persuasively, his message does not need to be measured against the standard of the truth, the Bible.

Jeroboam defied God by making the changes that he did in the worship of God. How shocking that the **created** would dare to disregard the will of the **Creator**! Certainly no one since the time of Jeroboam has qualified himself/herself to change God's laws. Surely we do not want to be in the position of defying God because of our ignoring or changing what He has said in His Word.

Open Our Eyes, Lord

The Word of God is just so full of things that are imminently pertinent and important for our personal application that we cannot possibly commit them all to memory. It becomes quite evident that we need periodic reminders that confront us again and again with these inspired messages that can provide substantial assistance to us on our daily journey through life.

God, in His matchless wisdom, dictated that throughout the Old Testament period His people were to be given regular reminders of His promises to them, of His love and concern for them, and of their responsibilities. Throughout the New Testament we see a continuation of His emphasis of our need to be reminded of our blessings and responsibilities, and His inspired spokesmen call attention to specific commands and principles, repeating them again and again.

One of the means that God has commanded to be used in the church to combat our forgetfulness of His will for us is the use of congregational singing. Paul, in Colossians 3:16, wrote that we are

to “*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.*” Thus, if our singing is as it is intended to be, it will (among other things) serve to assist us in teaching, admonishing, reminding, and helping each other.

We need to greatly appreciate the marvelous ability that only a few people possess to write the great songs that help us to worship God acceptably. Many of our songs are the result of the influence of specific portions of Scripture that stirred the heart and soul of the songwriter to the extent that he or she felt a great need to express his or her emotions and thoughts in verse and music. One such verse in the Old Testament is found in Psalm 119:18, where the psalmist beseeches the Heavenly Father, “*Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things from Your law.*” I don’t know the history of the writing of this song, but I am confident that this verse served as the inspiration for Clara H. Scott way back in 1895 when she wrote both the words and the music to the wonderful song, “**Open My Eyes, That I May See.**” Ms. Scott was undoubtedly sensitive to the significance of the words from the psalm as she wrote:

Open my eyes, that I may see glimpses of truth Thou hast for me;
Place in my hands the wonderful key that shall unclasp, and set me free.
Silently now I wait for Thee, Ready, my God, Thy will to see;
Open my eyes, illumine me, Savior divine!

Open my ears, that I may hear voices of truth Thou sendest clear;
And while the wavenotes fall on my ear, ev’rything else will disappear.
Silently now I wait for Thee, Ready, my God, Thy will to see;
Open my ears, illumine me, Savior divine!

Open my mouth, and let me bear gladly the warm truth ev’rywhere;
Open my heart, and let me prepare love with Thy children thus to share.
Silently now I wait for Thee, Ready, my God, Thy will to see;
Open my heart, illumine me, Savior Divine!

These heartfelt expressions ought to comprise our daily prayer, that the Lord would indeed open our eyes, our ears, and our heart to the truth of His Law.

It is my assumption that this same verse of Scripture provided the impetus for Robert Cull's writing of the short, but very touching song, **"Open Our Eyes, Lord."**

Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus,
To reach out and touch Him, and say that we love Him.
Open our ears, Lord, and help us to listen,
Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus.

May we all be more attentive to the reminders that can keep our focus on Jesus, who can lead us from earth to heaven.



Messages of Truth

Section Eight

Truth and Worship

True Worship

The subject of worship is currently the center of a great deal of attention and controversy in the Lord's church and in many of the denominations. Certainly this matter of worship should be of serious concern to all who desire to please God and who want to be His children.

Surely any study of true worship must include consideration of the words of Jesus in John 4:23,24, where the Lord said, "*But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.*" True worship thus involves both the **attitude** of the worshipper ("*worship in spirit*") and the **content** of the worship ("*in truth*").

Romans 15:4 states that "*whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.*" With that in mind, we see from Genesis chapter 4 that the first record of worship contains the fact that one of the two worshippers did not worship acceptably. God prescribed acceptable worship, and Cain dared to change it. Abel's worship was "*by faith*" (Hebrews 11:4), and his faith came from heeding the Word of God (Romans 10:17). Instructions for worship during the time of the tabernacle and the temple were outlined in detail by God. Nothing was left to personal preference or guesswork. The New Testament makes it clear what God regards as acceptable worship now.

Please note that from the beginning God has looked upon violation of His revealed will regarding worship as a very serious matter. As examples, let me refer you to Cain's unacceptable worship (Genesis 4), Nadab and Abihu's offering of strange fire (Leviticus 10), the Pharisees' making a show of their worship and religion, and the worship abuses by the Christians at Corinth (1 Corinthians 11,14).

The purpose of biblical worship is to exalt God. It is not intended to put attention on any man, nor is it designed primarily to provide blessings for the worshippers. Edification occurs, but it is not of first importance. Those who truly worship are indeed blessed, but this is a by-product, not the planned result.

I fully understand that those in favor of unwarranted changes in worship are in the majority in some situations, but this very good advice from someone outside the church is appropriate in such circumstances: **“Never confuse the will of the majority with the will of God.”** It is imperative that we remember that worship is not done to *us*, and it is not done *for* us, but it is done *by us*.

The Lordship of God and Christ

We will come nearer offering up acceptable worship to God when we understand the greatness, the Lordship of God and Jesus. When the Bible calls God or Jesus “Lord” it is using a word which was one of authority, a word designating a master as opposed to a slave. The word “Lord” is a one-word expression of complete devotion, of reverence and adoration and submission.

David showed an understanding of the appropriate attitude of those who would worship the Lord when he wrote in Psalm 89:7, *“God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be held in reverence by all those around Him.”* The writer of Hebrews also understood, saying that we are expected to *“serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear”* (Hebrews 12:28).

Contemporary VS Traditional Worship Styles

Some in and out of the church are saying that “we cannot reach modern man with the traditional style of worship.” The problem with that idea is that it is not the purpose of our worship to “reach modern man.” **We are to reach modern man with the Gospel! We are to be trying to reach GOD with our worship!** I believe that it is noteworthy that the New Testament nowhere indicates that worship assemblies were or are for the purpose of attracting unbelievers. The focus of acceptable worship is not the unbeliever, but the Lord God Himself.

There is nothing inherently right or wrong with either traditional or contemporary styles of worship. The problem with either one is if and when it incorporates activities and intentions that are not authorized by God's Word! As we deal with worship styles and related matters, it is very important that we remember the purpose of worship and who is to please whom in worship.

Conclusion

In times like these, when there is so much confusion, conflict, and disagreement over a matter of such importance as worship, it is critical that we understand that right is always right, and wrong is always wrong, regardless of who or how many agree or disagree. If God said it, that should settle it for all of us. Let us carefully and prayerfully consider His Word on the matter.

Prayer = to Jesus, to God, to Either, Or to Both?

Over the past several years it has become increasingly more common to hear men leading public prayers directed to Jesus, rather than to God the Father. This practice has been most noticeable in prayers relative to the observance of the Lord's Supper. Prayers are heard in which Jesus is the one being addressed, and yet those same prayers are offered in the name of Jesus. Is it possible to pray both to and through the same one? The purpose of this treatise is to give attention to whether it makes a difference as to whom we address our prayers.

Jesus was such a man of prayer that on at least one occasion He was requested to give instructions on the subject. *"And it came to pass, as He was praying in a certain place, when He ceased, one of His disciples said to Him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples'"* (Luke 11:1). The Lord's response, found in Luke 11:1-4 and Matthew 6:5-15, was what could well be called "The Model Prayer." He starts the lesson by telling His students to

whom their prayers are to be addressed — “*Our Father in heaven....*” In this very first phrase Christ answers the question as to whom we should pray — “*Our Father.*” Since this was a lesson on acceptable prayer, would it not seem reasonable to think that Jesus would have included the names of others who could be appropriately addressed in prayer, if indeed that were acceptable? In Matthew 7:7-11 Jesus makes it very obvious that prayer is to be directed to the Father. He makes no mention of praying to Himself or to any other — only to the Father.

Paul had a clear understanding that God is the one to whom prayer should be directed. He told the Christians of Rome, “*First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world*” (Romans 1:8). He wrote very similarly to the church at Colosse, “*We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you*” (Colossians 1:3). The apostle further instructed the Philippian Christians, “*Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God*” (Philippians 4:6). Please note that Paul consistently instructs his readers to pray, not to Christ, not to Christ and God, not to Christ or God, but simply to God. I have to believe that Paul would have known and conveyed to his readers the information if indeed it were acceptable to pray to anyone other than God the Father. Surely it is significant that no such information is recorded.

Jesus definitely has a major role to play in the prayers of Christians, but it is as an advocate, mediator, and high priest. The apostle John wrote, “*My little children, these things I write to you that you not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world*” (1 John 2:1-2). Jesus taught, “*...that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you*” (John 15:16). In John 16:23,24 He also stated, “*And in that day you will ask Me nothing. Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you. Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask and you will receive, that your joy may be full.*” Thus, Jesus made

it quite clear that we are to pray to the Father, and in the name of Christ. Paul advocated that we are to give our thanks **to the Father through Christ** (Colossians 3:17).

Let it be fully acknowledged that men leading public prayers are subject to nervousness and occasional memory lapses, resulting at times in their saying things that they did not really intend to say. Allowances need to be made for some of this. However, we still need to give advanced thought and preparation so that we do our best to say what is appropriate and scriptural.

Elders (especially), preachers, and teachers — surely it would be wise and fitting to provide teaching and training for men before they are asked to lead the congregation in praying. Some who are already regularly leading public prayers could profit from such learning, as well.

In conclusion, Jesus is highly important in our prayers, not as the one to whom we pray, but the one through whom we pray. We are to pray to the same being to whom Jesus prayed — the Father. Let us keep clearly in mind that Jesus is our **brother**, not our **Father**. Brethren, please think on these things.

“Come, Let Us Reason Together” ***(Isaiah 1:1-20)***

The words of Isaiah and the other prophets were obviously for the benefit of the people of their day, but they were much more than that. Their words contained principles that have also been applicable and pertinent for all generations since.

The first verse of the text says, “*The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz....*” Through divine guidance and revelation, Isaiah was made able to perceive the message that God wanted transmitted to His people, and he delivered that message as if the Lord Himself were speaking.

Jehovah testifies in verse two that He has cared for Judah as a loving and devoted father. In spite of the fact that He loved them

and provided for them as His children, their response was ingratitude, and even disobedience and outright rebellion.

We see in verses five and six that these people were so depraved and impenitent that they are pictured as being sick and afflicted from head to foot. They stubbornly refused to forsake their unrighteous ways. They were indeed a hopeless lot.

The Lord Reacts to Their Worship

Verses 11-15 constitute some of God's most harsh statements regarding false worship in the entire Old Testament. Judah's worship was no more than an abomination to the Lord!

Perhaps the Lord's animosity reached its zenith when He stated that His soul hated their disgusting excuse for worship (verse 14). We need to remember that this is the same God that John, in 1 John 4:8, 16, described as being the very personification of love! But we see here that the God of love can become totally nauseated by the conduct of His own chosen people!

The Remedy: REPENT

Fortunately for Judah, the Lord didn't leave them, as it were, dangling over the fires of Hell. In spite of all of His grave reprimands, His love for them is still there. This is seen in His plea in verses 16-17 to turn away from their evil and from their pretense and hypocrisy.

God specifies nine things in verses 16-17 that must be done in order to make their lives acceptable in His sight. Even a rather casual reading of these commands shows that acceptable worship requires much more than just doing the right acts at the right time and in the right manner when assembled for worship. We see here that people only fool themselves when they think that they can live carelessly and dishonorably through the week and then be able to offer up acceptable worship in the worship assembly.

A Reasonable Solution Is Offered by Jehovah

After this severe reprimand to Judah, the Lord again displays

His mercy and willingness to forgive penitent sinners. God entreats His wayward children to accept His reasonable terms of pardon. Thus, in verse 18, the loving Lord said, *“Come now, and let us reason together....”*

The Lord proposes that they be reasonable and acknowledge their sins and listen to His gracious offer to forgive them and accept them back into His good graces.

What an impressive gesture He is making! He stresses to them the awful contrast between purity and their sinfulness. Though the contrast is tremendous, Jehovah is more than willing to make them as pure as the snow.

The Choice Is Theirs

The Lord wills that all men be saved (2 Peter 3:9), but He leaves it up to man to decide for himself, as He says in verses 19-20 of our text, *“If you are willing and obedient....”*

Thus we come to the end of the Lord’s effort here to call His wayward people to reason. Isaiah concludes our text with the impressive affirmation, *“For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”* The Lord had spoken from the depths of His heart. In spite of all their sins, He still longed for the salvation of His people.

Lessons for Today

Though originally for Judah, the words of this text are so very pertinent for the church even today! Judah did not understand that acceptable worship of a holy God can only come from holy people. Now, what about us today? We have to realize that to offer up worship that is acceptable to God we must approach Him with *“clean hands and a pure heart...”* (Psalm 24:4).

We each must be fully persuaded of these three things regarding worship: (1) that worship is to be offered by people whose everyday lives depict a deep and sincere commitment to Christ; (2) that worship is submitted to God for His acceptance and pleasure; and (3) that we must not only possess this understanding ourselves — it is imperative that we continually do our very best to help other Christians to also understand this.

May we never neglect to treat God in the manner which He deserves. May we faithfully heed Him, honor Him, love Him, obey Him, serve Him, thank Him, and worship Him.

Worship Reflections

“Going to church” has been called one of our greatest “spectator sports.” Most honest observers would likely agree that this assessment of worship is not far from true. Thus the idea being advanced is that worship in this present society is not something that we *do* as worshipers, but rather something that *is done for us* in our presence.

Definition of Worship

It quickly becomes essential that “worship” be defined. Our English word comes from the earlier word “worth-ship.” The idea inherent in this word is declaring or acknowledging the worth of the object of our worship. The primary New Testament word for worship is *proskuneo*, a Greek term meaning to “kiss the hand or ground toward.” It is easy to see then that the idea is to bow down or prostrate oneself. This leads to the understanding that worship is a special means by which we show our reverence and adoration to God. Temple had it right when he said, “To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God.” Psalm 95:6-7 provides an excellent example of the action which springs forth from the heart of the true worshiper of God: *“Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord our Maker. For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand.”*

Purpose of Worship

Worship is to be quite in contrast with much of the rest of life. In our worship we are primarily to be givers, not getters. Our purpose

should be to give our praise, love, and adoration to God. While we will undoubtedly be blessed spiritually by offering up our worship “*in spirit and in truth*” (John 4:23-24), that result is secondary to what we give to God in our worship. The design of biblical worship is to give to the Lord what is pleasing to Him, not to seek pleasure for ourselves.

Worship Authority

It is absolutely imperative that everyone who wants to worship God realize the source of authority pertaining to what is acceptable or unacceptable in worship. The Bible leaves no doubt — God is the authority. From the very beginning of man’s existence, God has made it clear what He wants and does not want in man’s worship, and the will of man is never given a voice in the matter. In other words, we must never confuse the will of the majority with the will of God, especially in the matter of worship. The Bible is full of examples of men changing God’s rules for worship, and the results were disastrous for those who violated His authority. John 4:23-24, referred to above, makes very clear the matter of authority: “*But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.*”

The very first family in the existence of mankind had a serious problem with the fact that God has all authority. Adam and Eve were disobedient in Eden, and were expelled from that paradise. Then their son Cain disobeyed God in the matter of acceptable sacrifices, resulting in his paying the penalty the rest of his life.

A quick review of Exodus 32 brings to our memory the awful deeds of God’s people while Moses was away from them receiving the law from God. They too dared to change the worship of the Lord from what He had commanded, and the results were devastating.

Leviticus 10:1-2 tells us that Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, took it upon themselves to reject God’s authority and His will,

and they substituted strange (profane) fire before the Lord. Such action might not seem all that significant to us, but to God this was a serious usurpation of His divine will and instructions! The Lord was so displeased with their behavior and attitude that He caused these disobedient worshipers to be consumed with fire!

We read in 1 Kings 12-14 of yet another illustration of men purposely violating God's law and changing various aspects of worship to suit themselves rather than God. King Jeroboam boldly made many changes in the worship of the Lord, and God was exceedingly angry. The Lord ultimately dispensed terrible punishment upon Jeroboam for his defiance in the worship changes that he brought about.

Many more examples could be listed which would further illustrate the fact that our God is not willing to share His authority with men. To violate His authority, including in acts of worship, is a grave insubordination and is unacceptable.

A black and white photograph of a hand holding a chess piece, with a microscope in the background.

Messages of Truth

Section Nine

Truth and Discipleship

Discipleship

Because of the fact that the church is made up of human beings, the church has its imperfections. This does not mean at all that God intended for the church to be imperfect. If we succeeded in being exactly like God and Christ wants us to be, the church would not have any weaknesses, any imperfections. From almost the very birth of the church in the first century, of which we read in Acts chapter two, problems have arisen. The human element has always been very apparent. For example, in the church there has always been a problem of apathy, indifference, lethargy, laziness — but actually these terms do not designate the problem — they are the result of the problem. The real problem is a lack of understanding of what is involved in discipleship and the failure to be truly committed to that.

The word “disciple” means literally “a learner.” It comes from another word meaning “to learn,” indicating the involvement of thought accompanied by endeavor. Thus, it denotes one who follows someone’s teachings. A disciple was not only a pupil, he was an adherent. Disciples are thus spoken of in the New Testament as imitators of their teacher.

I like F. W. Farrar’s definition of a disciple. He described the disciple of Christ as “one who believes His doctrines, rests upon His sacrifice, imbibes His spirit, and imitates His example.”

With this brief background regarding the word “disciple” before us, let’s now look at the terms of discipleship which were laid down by Jesus Himself. (1) In Matthew 16:24 Jesus said that it is necessary that His disciples deny themselves, take up their own crosses, and follow Him. Surely self-denial must be the most difficult aspect of being a disciple of Jesus. The follower of Jesus is also told that he/she must also be willing to follow the example of Jesus in bearing his/her own cross of burdens and trials. (2) In addition, in Luke 14:26 and following verses, Jesus states that one who would be His disciple must hate his own family. The Lord certainly did not intend for us to think that we must hate in the way that the word is

usually used. "Hate" here has reference to the relative preference for one thing over another. Our love for Him is to be so great that, by comparison, our love for our family is as if it were hatred. (3) Then in Luke 14:33 Jesus declares that the disciple must forsake or renounce all. Christ accepts only those who are willing to place serving Him above everything else in this life. These terms of discipleship are certainly demanding. Apparently discipleship is not something which is to be taken lightly.

Becoming a disciple (or Christian) is one thing; **being** a disciple is another. In Luke 14:27 we learn that Jesus requires His disciples to follow Him. What is involved in following Jesus?

A. Counting the cost (Luke 14:28-35; 2 Peter 2:20-22).

B. Sacrifice. Jesus demands first place. In Luke 5:11 they left all. In Matthew 6:33 Jesus says to seek Him first.

C. Continuing in Christ's Word. In John 8:31,32 Jesus said, *"If you continue in My word, then you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."* It should be obvious to all that in order to **continue** in Christ's Word we must first of all **know** His Word. It should be no wonder then that the Holy Spirit led Paul to instruct Timothy and us, *"Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth"* (2 Timothy 2:15).

D. Following in Christ's footsteps. Being a disciple of Jesus necessitates our following in His footsteps as they lead us to:

1. The wilderness of temptation.
2. The house of worship.
3. Fields of service.
4. The mountain of prayer.
5. The garden of despair.
6. The cross of suffering.
7. The valley of death.
8. The throne of God.

All who would be disciples of Jesus need to be assured that the steps of Jesus do not end in the dark valley of suffering and death, but rather they proceed into Heaven and to the very throne of God (Revelation 3:21).

There are many different kinds of disciples in our world. Some are disciples of Christ, but many are disciples of false gods and of mere men. It is hoped that each one who calls himself/herself a disciple of Jesus will take more care to follow in His footsteps. True discipleship will change the world.

A True Hero of the Faith

The study of history has the potential for some very interesting and enlightening information. To study history is to study the lives of people who lived during that period of time. To study the Bible likewise includes learning about the lives of the people who make up the story of the Bible.

In studying the Bible, it is somewhat intriguing to note that some of God's greatest followers and servants have taken on a sort of anonymity. In spite of their remarkable contributions to the cause of the Lord, some remain largely unknown to us. We would do well to consider the life and character of one such very noteworthy figure from the pages of the New Testament.

One fact contributing to the lack of recognition for this person is that his name appears only two times in all the Bible — in Philippians 2:25 and again in Philippians 4:18. Epaphroditus was his name, and his brief but extraordinary biography appears in Philippians 2:25-30.

In verse 25 we are introduced very quickly to the caliber of character and commitment of Epaphroditus. Paul describes him as his “*brother*.” The great apostle thus refers to Epaphroditus as his equal. In Galatians 3:28 Paul had written, “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*” In his treatment

of Epaphroditus, we see Paul practicing what he preached. In like manner, Paul called him a “*fellow worker*” and a “*fellow soldier*.” They were not just companions, but they were workers. As a fellow soldier, Epaphroditus exhibited bravery and dedication, willing to sacrifice himself for the welfare of others.

Word of Epaphroditus’ illness reached the folks back home in Philippi, but not the news of his recovery (verse 26). This servant of Christ was less worried about his own critical illness than about the anxiety that the news of his illness was causing to his friends and loved ones back home. He practiced “*weep with those who weep*” (Romans 12:15).

Epaphroditus nearly died for Christ and His church (verse 27)! Surely such examples as this ought to cause us today to stop and think. Have we ever really suffered because of our service for and commitment to Christ? What have we ever actually sacrificed for Jesus? This godly man loved the Lord so much that he nearly died trying to serve Him!

In reading both verses 25 and 28, we learn that in spite of Epaphroditus’ great desire to return to Philippi, he was willing to stay with Paul, but it was Paul who decided that this dear brother and co-worker must go. Like his Lord, Epaphroditus put others ahead of himself.

Verse 29 is certainly a joy to read. Here Paul is heaping praise upon Epaphroditus, and rightly so. Paul advocates that this man of God and others like him are deserving of the respect and admiration of their fellow Christians.

As he closes this very brief tribute to his dear friend and brother, Paul emphasizes once again the fact that Epaphroditus almost died in rendering service to Paul on behalf of the church at Philippi. Paul wanted to assure the brethren back home that Epaphroditus was not a quitter, that he was not a shirker, but was a devoted worker!

Paul was in prison, determined and dedicated, but lonely. Just the presence of a friend or loved one in time of trouble or sickness is a great source of comfort, and Epaphroditus was indeed such

a one. He readily associated with and identified himself with Paul, one who was very unpopular at the time, a convict, and one who was no doubt regarded as a traitor by the Jews.

What a beautiful relationship there was between these two wonderful disciples. Just try to imagine what the scene might well have been like when Epaphroditus departed from Paul in prison that day and headed out of Rome back to Philippi. Undoubtedly there were tears of love and sorrow, much the same as Paul shared with the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:36-38. Surely these two special friends embraced one another, each one reluctant to let go of the other. Can't you just hear Paul's encouraging words? "Take care of yourself. Don't worry about me. I'll be alright." In all likelihood, expressions of gratitude flowed from the heart and tongue of Paul, as well as a request for Epaphroditus to relay his greetings to various ones at Philippi and his thanks to all of the church there.

Thus we come to the end of this all-too-brief account of the life of a true servant of God. I do not know any family that has named one of their children "Epaphroditus," but we would be hard-pressed to find a more worthy model for our children to imitate.

Digging Spiritual Holes

In Matthew 25:14-30 we read the parable of the talents. You will remember that Jesus told of a certain master giving three servants different amounts of money, the amounts varying in relation to the ability of each one. One was given five talents (or portions of money), another was given two, and the third received one. If you will recall, each of the first two servants wisely handled the master's money, even to the extent of doubling it.

But then, there was that fellow who had been given the one talent. His handling of his master's money resulted in no increase whatsoever. Notice the master's rebuke: "*You wicked and slothful (lazy) servant...*" The master later refers to this one as "*the unprofitable servant*" (verse 30).

Question: What was it that the servant had done that was so bad? Answer: Nothing — absolutely nothing. That was the problem. Instead of trying to make a profit for his master, he just went out and dug a hole in the ground and buried the master's money.

The master trusted them all; he placed his confidence in them. He was giving them an opportunity to prove themselves worthy of his faith in them. He didn't stay there and look over their shoulders to see if they were handling the situation just like he would do it. Instead, he went away and gave them the opportunity to make their own decisions.

Before leaving, the master let the servants know clearly what he expected of them. There was no lack of instruction or communication. Each one could know just as well as the others exactly what the master wanted him to do. All that was necessary was to pay attention to what the master said before he left.

It is also noteworthy in verse 19 that it was only after "*a long time*" that the master returned and asked for an accounting by each servant. He gave them ample time to do what was expected of them. They were allotted sufficient time to start out wrong and end up right — they had plenty of time to make some mistakes and still correct their course of action and present an acceptable profit to the master upon his return.

I believe the fact that the master was gone for "*a long time*" is a definite indication that he did not expect or require significant results immediately. It seems that he understood that things require an adequate amount of time in order to be accomplished.

Even a rather casual reading of this parable shows that these servants were not in competition with each other. The master had not made a contest out of the situation. It was not a matter of who was more adaptable than the others, but rather it was a matter of who was faithful in following instructions and trying to do the will of the master. The servant who received two talents of money received the same praise and commendation as the one who had received five. They deserved equal recognition — they had both done the same thing, that is, they both did the best they knew how to do with what they had.

The master did not require fantastic results. Verse 27 shows that he would have been satisfied if the servant who was entrusted with the one talent had just put the money in the bank and earned the interest on it. That wouldn't be much of a return now, and it would not have been that much then either, but it would have at least been an improvement over digging a hole in the dirt and depositing the money there.

In verse 24 we read the report to the master by the servant who buried the money. He said, *"I knew you to be a hard man..."* Obviously, this was only an excuse, not a fact. There is nothing in the text to indicate that the master was hard or demanding, except for the fact that he did demand obedience. There is no evidence of harshness or unfairness on his part.

Jesus wants us all to see that He is portrayed by the master in the story, and that we, as His followers, are the servants. Let's be sure to carefully read the parable with this in mind.

We can all be successful servants, stewards. Our Master is not a hard taskmaster, but He has made it clear that "digging a hole" and burying our spiritual talents will not be acceptable. He definitely is demanding that every servant of His be busy using his/her talents in an effort to increase the size of the Master's estate. May all of us rejoice in our role as His servants and do our very best to faithfully use what He has entrusted to us, and not bury it in fear of failure. He wants us to succeed, and He has promised to help us be successful.

Achieving Greatness

If asked to name a few of the great heroes of the Bible, men and/or women who exhibited extraordinary faith and commitment, most all of us would have little or no difficulty immediately thinking of such famous Bible characters as Moses, Abraham, Noah, Ruth, David, Esther, Peter, Paul, John the Baptist, Dorcas, and so on.

However, we can quickly get ourselves into trouble when we start trying to classify people or things in terms of their relative importance. I'm a big-time fan of baseball, especially of the St. Louis Cardinals. As an ardent baseball fan, I might be asked who I think should rank as the five best baseball players of all time. There is no way that I could answer that without there being tremendous disagreement from other baseball fans. There are nearly 250 players from years gone by who have been named to the Baseball Hall of Fame, dating clear back to 1936, with several of those players having played many years even prior to that. So, who would have the audacity to say that he knows the identity of the five best of all time? Add to that the fact that there are some really outstanding players who are still playing, some of whom will undoubtedly be added to the Hall of Fame later. In addition to that, there are many other very talented players who very arguably should have been voted into the Hall of Fame, but have not been. No, I couldn't even begin to decide just who I think should be classified as the five best players. Let me mention, too, that I could name many players who were great, who are even in the Hall of Fame, whose names would not even be recognized by many people who are avid fans of baseball today. The point is that there have been and are many great players, and it is impossible to determine without any dispute just which ones qualify as the very best.

We can experience the same kind of difficulty if we start trying to identify the greatest of the followers of God from the beginning until this present time. We could approach the subject by trying to evaluate the greatness of all the characters of whom we read in the Bible, but using such an approach could not even likely result in a correct answer because of the fact that thousands and even millions of other disciples of the Lord have lived whose names are now known to no one. Some of the great ones remain nameless as far as we are concerned today, but that lack of knowledge on our part should not in any way detract from their greatness.

Let's make this quest for determining the greatest among God's people more current. If we were to ask ourselves about who

we deem to be the greatest Christians that we either know personally or know about, who would they be? Perhaps I am mistaken, but I suspect that in a great many cases most of us would primarily think in terms of well-known preachers and other church leaders of various categories whose reputations have become more widespread than most. Let us hasten to acknowledge that many of these might very well be deserving of such recognition, but let's also realize that reputation and character are not the same thing. Let's further understand that one can still render marvelous service in the kingdom while humbly preferring to avoid being in a leadership role.

Greatness is not achieved in all realms by the same methods. Most great athletes or scholars or artists became great in their field because they also possessed a drive and a determination to excel. However, greatness in Christianity doesn't come from a deep inner motivation to be the best. Rather, all who have attained greatness in Christ have done so by emulating Jesus in emptying themselves of themselves (Philippians 2:5-8), by becoming "*poor in spirit*" (Matthew 5), by doing and teaching the commandments of the Lord (Matthew 5:19), and by serving others and giving of themselves for the benefit of others (Matthew 20:26-28). Jesus clearly affirms these as identifying marks of greatness.

All these words are intended to impress upon us the fact that greatness is possible for every child of God. Hopefully, each and every one of us will have our spirits boosted by the realization that we all can be great in the eyes of that One who truly knows greatness when He sees it.

May the beloved Paul's admonition be our constant guide and source of enduring encouragement. May these words ever ring in our ears and throb in our hearts: "*Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord*" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Some Biblical Tears = Their Causes and Lessons

Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, mention is made of numerous instances of the weeping of even faithful followers of God. Hopefully it will be helpful for us to take a look at just a few instances of these tears, both of anguish and of joy, and then try to draw some appropriate conclusions.

Hezekiah, a great king of Judah, was informed by God through Isaiah that he should “*set his house in order*” (2 Kings 20:1ff.), for he was gravely ill and about to die. The king’s immediate response was to pray to the Lord about his plight and to ask God to remember his faithful service for the Lord. Then we read, “*And Hezekiah wept bitterly*” (verse 3). God heard His noble servant, and He saw his tears. As a result, the Lord extended Hezekiah’s life by fifteen years.

Jeremiah had long been known as “*the weeping prophet*” because of his constant concern for the faithfulness of God’s people and his deep remorse over their disobedience. God again warned the people through His spokesman Jeremiah, and the prophet then tells the people, “*But if you will not hear it, my soul will weep in secret for your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly and run down with tears, because the Lord’s flock has been taken captive*” (Jeremiah 13:17). Jeremiah was not just a messenger. His was not an attitude of “take it or leave it.” He cared very deeply whether the people “took” it or “left” it.

In Luke 7:36-50 we read about a sinful woman who was known for her life of sin, yet she was drawn to Jesus. She came and stood behind Him as He was eating in a reclined position (as was the custom of the day). As she stood there, she was overcome with emotion, causing her to weep profusely, so much so that her tears wet the Lord’s feet. Her love for the goodness and compassion that she witnessed in Him produced a very touching scene, and she wiped His feet, anointed them with perfume, and kissed them.

Peter did just what Jesus had told him he would do — he denied the Savior. Hopefully we recall how Peter reacted when he came to realize what he had done. The bold, brazen apostle “went out and wept bitterly” (Luke 22:62, also Matthew 26:75 and Mark 14:72), a testimony to the fact of his bitter shame and remorse.

The apostle Paul should be known as much for his love and tenderness as his boldness. For example, he reminded the elders from Ephesus in Acts 20:31, “...and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.” He also sent this tender message to the church at Corinth: “For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you, with many tears, not that you should be grieved, but that you might know the love which I have so abundantly for you” (2 Corinthians 3:4).

The occasion is this: Jesus has come back to Jerusalem, the city that He loves so and has pleaded with so much to repent (Matthew 23:37; Luke 13:34). As He looks down over the city from the Mount of Olives, He is reminded of their refusal to repent and be saved from their sins. Luke then says, “Now as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it” (Luke 19:41). In spite of their mistreatment of Him, He still cried because they were lost and without hope.

What can we learn from all of these tears? **(1)** May we be duly impressed with the fact that God does note the faithfulness of His children, and that He does bless them, not necessarily with extended life, but with those blessings which His wisdom calls for. **(2)** May we learn to have a passionate concern, not just for our own friends or congregation, but for all of God’s children, longing for all of the church to honor Him. **(3)** May we learn that forgiveness of our sins is indeed the most awesome gift imaginable, and that we have nothing to offer in payment but our unending gratitude and lifelong obedience. **(4)** May we learn that sin is a disgrace, and that it should result in an intense feeling of shame and a dramatic determination to repent and obey. **(5)** May we learn to love the church to the extent that we hurt when any part of it is in pain, and to the extent that we would willingly suffer personal loss for the

benefit of the church. (6) May we learn to care so much for the lostness of individuals, cities, nations, and the world that we are unable to keep from shedding tears.

Lord, please help Your people to learn these lessons.

The Call of Jesus

Jesus always made clear the demanding terms and the costliness of being His disciple. Nothing has changed — He still calls people the same way. Please notice the honest, forthright call of Jesus: ***“If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me”*** (Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:34, Luke 9:23).

“If any man will”

Jesus immediately makes it clear that man has a definite part to play in this call. Man must have a *desire* to follow Jesus. Following Jesus is a matter of choice — it most certainly is God’s will, but the decision is left to us to make. Peter admonished the multitude on the day of Pentecost, *“Save yourselves from this perverse generation”* (Acts 2:40). Later Paul told the Philippians to *“work out your own salvation with fear and trembling”* (Philippians 2:12).

It is noteworthy that Jesus speaks of **any** man following Him. Every individual who desires to follow Jesus can do so, but all must comply with the same requirements — there are no exceptions, no favorites.

“Come after Me”

Surely, if we desire to *“come after”* Jesus, we will understand that we will be required to comply with His orders. This means that we cannot ignore His words in favor of the words of anyone else. Those who are truly pointing men to Jesus will of necessity also be pointing them to His words. The Lord spoke of some who were among the spiritual leaders in His day — *“And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of*

men” (Matthew 15:9). In essence, Jesus was saying that folks are only fooling themselves when they choose to ignore what **He** says in favor of what **they** might prefer.

“Let him deny himself”

This phrase has also been translated “*he must say ‘no’ to self;*” “*he must leave self behind;*” “*he must give up all right to himself.*”

I believe that it is significant that the first thing that Jesus said is necessary in following Him is self-denial. He knew the difficulty of denying self, and He knew that without denying self we can never put Him first in our life. Paul came to a thorough understanding of this principle. In Philippians 3 he writes of his past accomplishments in the Jewish religion, but then he states, “*But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. But indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ*” (verses 7 and 8). Please also consider Paul’s words in Philippians 1:21 and Galatians 2:20.

“And take up his cross”

Even after the Roman soldiers compelled Simon of Cyrene to carry Jesus’ cross the rest of the way to Calvary, Jesus continued to carry the unseen cross that was His greatest burden. Isaiah foretold, “*The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all*” (Isaiah 53:6). Peter said that Jesus “*Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree*” (1 Peter 2:24). John declared that Jesus “*is the propitiation* (the atonement, that which appeases) *for our sins; and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world*” (1 John 2:2). William F. McDowell had it right then when he said, “The cross was not heavy because of the wood, but because of the world.”

But Jesus never asks us to bear **His** cross, rather He says that we must bear **our own** cross. The cross was an instrument of death, and Jesus says to those who would be His followers, “You must

take up your cross; you must die to self.” He sums it up with these words, “*And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it*” (Matthew 10:38,39).

“Daily”

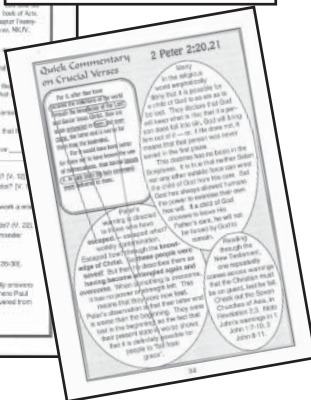
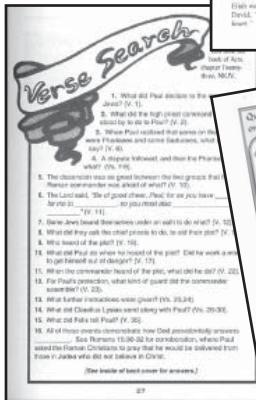
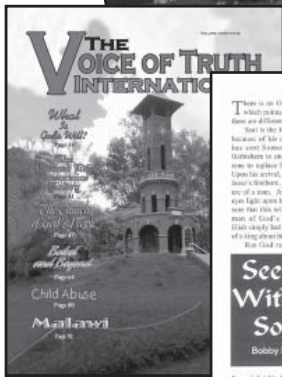
Only Luke records the fact that Jesus stipulated that His followers are to bear their cross **daily**. True discipleship is consistent, regular, faithful. **There is never any hint that Jesus will accept anything other than full-time, full-fledged commitment.** Following Jesus involves putting Him first and serving Him from the heart every day.

The time will come when there will be no more crosses to bear, but crowns to wear. Hopefully we can bear our cross with the constant realization that our burdens of service and submission are light in comparison with what Jesus has borne for us. May we continually press on to the finish line of this race, being confident of the victor’s crown that awaits all who run with patience the entire race.

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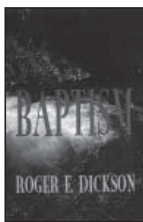
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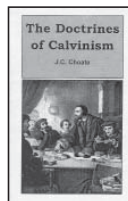
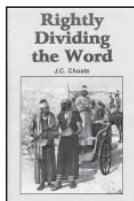
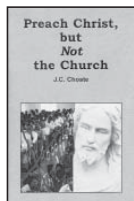
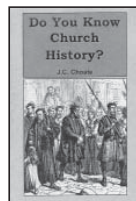
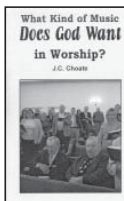


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