



Shepherd's Voice.

MAGAZINE

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Free!

In this issue...

Children of God: Babes in Arms, Babes in Christ

Kingdom Misconceptions

Three Little Words

The First Commandment: Perfecting Love for God



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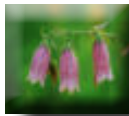
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Greetings!

There are a few scriptures that continually resonate in my mind that always reorient my thoughts to a more productive hope in our faith, as we all get distracted by our “worries of faith,” as well as personal needs and concerns. One of these is found in Paul’s letter to the Colossians:

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not things on the earth (Colossians 3:1-2).

Paul wrote these words in dealing with false conceptions of the work and life of Jesus Christ in true believers so that we not be cheated by the *basic principles of the world* (2:8). Undue distraction of earthly things takes our mind off the supremacy and empowerment of a more spiritual focus. The solution is a heavenward focus. We are being asked to raise our expectations.

In the article *Kingdom Misconceptions*, we discuss a few basic principles of the world that have imposed ideas of the Kingdom that prevail even in the Church of God today. We contrast these earthly beliefs and speculations with what Christ has revealed of the Kingdom, and of the Royal Priesthood. We conclude with the spiritual realities that await the believer, so to help raise our expectations.

At some point, sharing of spiritual things as we do in this article becomes increasingly difficult. It is my belief that God alone reserves the right of true enlightenment to those who first seek the kingdom of God. This is reflected in Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians

...the eyes of your understanding be enlightened; that you may know the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe ... (Ephesians 1:18,19).

The writer of Hebrews knew it is possible for us to taste the powers of the age to come if the Father is willing (Hebrews 6:5). We may be resigned to the fact we see through a glass only darkly (1 Corinthians 13:12), but at the same time success is not in a vacuum. For success we need the awareness of the power of the Spirit of God working in us.

In this issue we include the second installment of Jeff Patton’s eBook “*Ten Words*,” The First Commandment: Perfecting Love for God. Historical idols of the past may seem foolish to the modern thinker and believer, but the present day clever equivalents are any competing person or group that diverts us from God’s revealed moral and ethical standards. Centers of human influence around the world are the source of philosophical traps for the lukewarm Christian.

The entire staff and contributors of Shepherd’s Voice Magazine are volunteers in this work, which some do in addition to their own local ministries, and with full time employment. We thank our Father and Lord Jesus Christ in blessing our efforts to preach the gospel.

In Christ’s Service
Jim Patterson

Kingdom Misconceptions



Since the time of Jesus Christ, mankind has held various misconceptions of the Kingdom of God. Our own ideas of government and organizations that are born out of worldly experience can lead us to conceive God's Kingdom is a glorious ideal of the same form. This article brings us to the conclusion that there is a fundamental difference between the Kingdom of God, and all that we can conceive of or experience in any man-made organizational structure. Before we can conclude with what is unique about the Kingdom of God as revealed by Jesus Christ, it is necessary that we should dispose of a few misconceptions.

How are we doing today in the Church of God with our understanding of the Kingdom of God? I think it is a fair question to ask, and an important one, as we are currently part of the Kingdom's advancement on earth. If that last sentence appears awkward, then perhaps we have already touched on a misconception on God's Kingdom. We will get to that later, and some very exciting promises in the Bible about the Kingdom of God.

Beware of the Institutional Trap

The Church of God has been exposed to various presentations of the Church or the Kingdom suggesting that Christ is building an organization. These presentations often have corporate underpinnings, and have even suggested that independence of these ideas of an organization, is an opposite or opposing idea of Christ's intentions, and is selfish, or subverting the process. These discussions distract us from Jesus Christ's revealing of the Gospel of the Kingdom.

We need to take Jesus Christ at His word when He stated "My Kingdom is not of this World" (John 18:36). There are no parts of our worldly models that will form part of the kingdom. What a relief.

The Babel Bust

The first Biblical account of a large scale organized cohesive group is the account of the city of Babel.

And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth" (Genesis 11:4).

From this statement, we are told it was fear and pride as the motivating factors behind the construction of the city. The tower they built was a ziggurat, which was a kind of winding pyramid, or having successive steps so that one can reach the top. At the top there may have been a shrine. Though this tower may have had religious significance, we see non-religious forms of them today. Every generation builds its symbols of achievement, which could be actual skyscrapers or mega corporations making a name for themselves.

The people of Babel had a few things going for them which fueled their growth. They were united in language, and they were united in one spirit of pride. This type of unity fuels a false sense of power that leads to greater rebellion against God. Indeed, the Lord did not ordain that they centralize, but He commanded them to "fill the earth" (Genesis

9:1). The Lord saw the escalating problem:

And the Lord said, "Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them" (Genesis 11:6).

The Lord's solution was not the destruction of the people, He rather graciously intervened and let them live so that they could come to their senses and perhaps return to Him for their security.

"Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad with power" — Charles A. Beard

Before God acts, He often allows situations to escalate to such a degree before He intervenes, and His delay should not be considered an endorsement at the time. Those who unwittingly shift their loyalty from the Creator to systems of men may find themselves scattered to find the Lord again.

Kingdom of Israel

Another case of following the temptation for centralization was the origins of the Kingdom of Israel, a United Monarchy, which came about by the rejection of the Lord's rule as their King. Israel up to that time was one nation, comprised of a loose federation of tribes. Each were expected to seek the Lord as their King.

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, "Look you are old, and

Unity versus Uniformity

An excerpt from To the Angel of the Scattered Churches —SVM Winter 2010, pg. 25.

What many church workers stumble on is the difference between uniformity, which comes about by pressure from without, and unity, which comes from within. Unity is the better way, is a matter of the heart, and is a state that calls upon our highest spiritual motives.

The better way is more sustaining and fruitful. Christ identified His followers not as efficient, or numerous, or reporting positive statistics. He identified them as having love for one another. We need to get this before we get anywhere.

From our understanding of love as it is presented to us in 1 Corinthians 13, we learn that it does not lend itself to efficiency. To bear, endure, believe, and hope all things is not an efficient way to operate. Efficiency makes short work of people as it favors profit over losses and always chooses the lesser of two evils rather than taking the fall for the failure of others. Efficiency seeks allegiances and manipulates as required to control and favors the strong over the weak even as loyalty and favors are rewarded for the purposes of more control. It is the protection of the self.

The Church of God routinely stumbles on efficiencies believing they are for the common good, responsible, and prudent. It is the aspiration for uniformity at work. Long term practice of this kind of thinking makes one become institutionalized and seems impossible to reverse. Many are the walking wounded who have identified God's church itself with these efficient practices.

your sons do not walk in your ways, now make us a king to judge us like all the nations" (1 Samuel 8:4-5).

The request itself was not what displeased Samuel and God; it was their disbelief in the Lord's security, which was subject to their obedience to the law. Instead they wanted a centralized power, amalgamated under a king, who would "... go out before us and fight our battles" (1 Samuel 8:20). What they forgot was that Israel's strength was unlike any other nation. They were a covenant people. Their wisdom and strength were in the Law Giver. These elders looked at the worldly model of government and were tempted by its offering of security and uniformity. At first the warnings against having a centralized system under a human king did not come to fruition. The harsh realities came to be under King Solomon (1 Kings 4:7-28, 12:1-4).

We tend to discard the harder belief that the Lord is our security, and rather undetectably, look to self-assured leaders who will tell us we are ok. And that is more than evident in recent Church of God history, and in many current forms. The easy path for us has been uniformity. We institutionalize easier, and we interpret that as unity. We may begin to serve the institution, which over time may lead to disillusionment. The message will begin to serve the organization, not the Head or the needs of the congregants. Fear and dependency begin to dominate the decision making processes of those in charge.

Throughout history the Lord appears to have an issue with centralization that comes about by man, particularly when it is a rejection of His promise to be the Provider. God did accede to the wishes of Israel to have a king, but God's greatest judgment is often allowing us to have our own way. It is a judgment mixed with grace. We are capable of organizing in groups in His name, and there is nothing in scripture that forbids it. But the first commandment must be kept, for we are responsible to ensure that we do not find our security in it, or as leaders, offer more than it is supposed to offer, or deem others suspect for their relative independence. In the end, there is only one centralization that our Lord will endorse, and it is entirely connected to the Father's will.

... that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him (Ephesians 1:10).

This is the presentation of the Kingdom we need to have solid in our hearts. All contrary ideas must be avoided, they are often rooted in the institutional traditions of men we have touched on here. Sometimes they are ideas that have infiltrated from the corporate world. Sometimes they are doctrinal, but both mitigate the true message of the Gospel that Christ delivered to us.

"Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone. They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch" (Matt 15:13-14).

These words of Jesus were given in the context regarding vain worship that comes about by the doctrines of men. Many have fallen into the ditch of believing false presentations of the Gospel and false ideas of the Church's role in spreading and presenting the message.

Disillusionment with unfulfilled promises of prophecy and false ideas of the Church of God have led many to fall away or become ineffective and stagnant.

The discussion above is necessary in an attempt to dispose of institutional ideas we have imposed on God's kingdom. We are not the first to do so either.

When is the Kingdom Showing Up?

In an encounter with the Pharisees, the religious elite and custodians of the law at that time, Jesus was engaged regarding when the Kingdom of God would come.

During this time, the Jewish people lived in an atmosphere of anticipation. There was an expectancy of a deliverer, such as they had before in Moses, and that which was promised. With the attention on Jesus going to Jerusalem, perhaps then He would establish the promised Kingdom. Today, with Christianity at large, there is this same atmosphere of expectancy. There is a lesson to be learned from this encounter, and from the private lesson that Jesus gives to his disciples shortly thereafter.

Now when He was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them and said, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:20,21).

Jesus Christ without question will return with great observation, the Kingdom of God apparently will not arrive in the same fashion. The Pharisees saw the kingdom as political, not universal. Fascinated with the great events of the future, they were consumed with knowing the kingdom's progression. I have a feeling that if Jesus walked the earth today, many of us would ask him the same question, and for some of the same reasons. Jesus' response would be the same to us as it was to them: He emphasized the spiritual kingdom, which can only be known and experienced by the presence of Christ in the heart (1 Colossians 1:27).

From this discussion, Jesus was prompted to say more privately to His disciples:

"The days will come when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. And they will say to you, 'Look here!' or 'Look there!' Do not go after them or follow them" (Luke 17:22,23).

There is something here that Jesus Christ wants us to know about Christian life leading up to His return. Don't try to continuously evaluate or have an unhealthy obsession with His return, and don't be anxious about it either. We should examine our thinking in light of this, because a completely forward look to the established Kingdom of God on earth and the Millennial rule of Jesus Christ, will cause us to miss out on the present experience and opportunity that the Kingdom of God offers. Indeed, there is a present experience!

For decades the Kingdom of God has been presented as the future reign on earth of Jesus Christ. This message is true, but Jesus Christ has already reigned (past) and is reigning in the present in the hearts of men and women. The Gospel of the Kingdom can be experienced now.

Jesus Christ and the New Testament writers have never presented the Gospel as all future and neither should we, but in many ways we have, leading to another possible misconception. Where does this come from?

I have often heard the phrase "The Gospel of the coming Kingdom of God", or the "soon

The Indestructible Kingdom

The beatitudes reveal and introduce the Kingdom of God in a most special way. They are not splendid and vague hopes of what someday will be experienced by God's people; they speak to the gifts on what already is. The blessedness that belongs to believers is not something that is exclusively postponed to a world tomorrow of glory. Jesus Christ speaks of a blessedness that is already implanted and growing in the heart of the believer that will come to fullness in the presence of God in the Kingdom. It is a blessedness the believer has already entered. It can be enjoyed now.

What Jesus is talking about sounds pretty good, but He is not speaking in general terms, nor broadcasting a message out to the meek, the mourners and the peacemakers of the world; He is speaking about a brand new existence and state of being of true begotten believers. He is speaking of the new creature in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Perhaps experience does not seem consistent with the nowness of the blessedness of which our Lord speaks. Don't let life's experiences be deceptive, focus your thinking on the experience of Christ in your life, for those experiences are not deceptive. Perhaps more discussion on the nature of Blessedness of the Kingdom of God will be worthwhile.

The word "blessed" used in all verses of the beatitudes is a significant word. The Greek word is *makarios*. *Makarios* is a joy that resides in secret (hidden), tranquil and untouchable. It is a joy that is completely independent of all the changes that happen in life. Jesus spoke of this same joy later in His ministry:

Therefore you now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you (John 16:22).

When we are in pain, suffering loss, experiencing loneliness, these feelings indeed lay hold center stage, but that is not the defeat of the inner joy that is the blessedness that Christ has promised. The beatitudes speak of a joy that pain and grief are powerless to touch. This same joy does not leave, but resides and seeks us out again, even during duress, for it will not be defeated.

coming Kingdom of God." This phrase is not found in the New Testament, for we have inserted the word "coming" into the message, implying a future only experience. When, our Lord taught us to pray, He said "Your Kingdom Come". Here He is not exclusively referring to the event of His return and millennial rule, He is also speaking of something broader in scope and current in time. He is talking about how we should focus our prayers on His will that the Kingdom continue to come and rule in our hearts, and in the hearts of others, and that time is now. This simply means it is time to cultivate love in our

hearts, time for the renewal of our mind. It is time to embrace the metamorphosis that comes about by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore when I hear discussion about the Church's role in where to direct its efforts and resources into either proclaiming the coming Kingdom of God, versus feeding the flock, then this is a clear symptom of misinterpreting the gospel message. The gospel message of the Kingdom is not to be divided.

The Gospel is about opportunity, "*Repent for the Kingdom of God is at Hand*", not

“Repent, for death and destruction is at hand.” Death and destruction are certainly coming, but it is the goodness of God that brings us to repentance. Even His delay in return is a testimony to His goodness, and if we are on the same page as He is, we will interpret as He does and not simply be anxious about our own stake in the Lord’s return:

Therefore pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest (Matthew 9:38).

The Kingdom’s Advancement

Then He said, “What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it? “It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and put in his garden; and it grew and became a large tree, and the birds of the air nested in its branches” (Luke 13:18-19).

And again He said, “To what shall I liken the kingdom of God? It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened” (Luke 13:20:21).

Here we get Christ’s impression of the advancement of the Kingdom. It begins small, but grows slowly as a tree may grow at first, with acceleration to dominance, and will be pervasive as leaven, permeating everywhere invisibly (hidden), but with visible results.

The permeating of the kingdom is unique, the inhabitants of the kingdom are filled with the spirit of unity, and one with the King. And that is the message of the Gospel, that the Spirit of God that rules His Kingdom, can rule in your heart today. Indeed, the Spirit of God was given on the Day of Pentecost and the Kingdom got a jump start ahead. It has been said that Pentecost was a reversal of Babel, now with the proper Spirit, and with God’s approval, centralized in Jesus Christ.

The Kingdom is Inherited, not Just Entered

Our discussion to dismiss corporate and institutional ideas of the Kingdom and the “all future” blessings of it are necessary

so they no longer cloud the true hopes of the Gospel, and the divine nature.

Jesus Christ revealed a special and exciting truth about the Kingdom of God that cannot be fully grasped by our currently limited ability to understand.

“Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32).

And

“Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world...’ (Matthew 25:34).

The Kingdom of God will belong to you. Its origins are not born out of fear or pride. It exists for the Glory of God.

See the essential difference? You can belong to an institution, at best you can head one up, but even then you will always fear losing it. An institution will never belong to you. You can only belong to it.

The Glory of God in the Kingdom

What does it mean when God is Glorified? It means that the Life of God is enhanced, increased, adorned further and undoubtedly even more than that.

“Herein is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit” (John 15:8).

The work of the Spirit of God coming to fruition in His children glorifies the Father. When His life is enhanced, so does all life that relates to Him. Indeed His very existence is enhanced. When God is glorified, it is not just an event in time, it is for all time.

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God has before ordained that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:10).

God’s workmanship is always His masterpiece! We are fulfilling His desire. Only that which is Holy can bring about holiness and perfection.

And yet, there is more!

Kings and Priests

Who we are and who we are becoming will complete our discussion of the Kingdom.

But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; (1 Peter 2:9).

... and He has made us kings and priests to His God and Father ... (Revelation 1:6).

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The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which a man took and put in his garden; and it grew and became a large tree, and the birds of the air nested in its branches

Christians Keeping Old Testament Feast Days?

When Christians discover other Christians keeping the biblical Feasts, they often think, “That was an Old Testament Law, like sacrifices, and ended at Christ’s death. Feast-keeping is not necessary for salvation.” The Bible explains what we need to know. Let us begin with the relationship between faith, grace, works and salvation:

Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin (Romans 3:20).

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:8).

Good works never save us. A Christian does not enter the kingdom of God because he has been diligent to never kill or steal. A Christian is not saved because he preaches the Gospel or observes biblical Feasts. Christ saves us if we have faith in Him to do it. However, when we are trusting in Christ, we do the good works that He does. “*He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked*” (1 John 2:6).

A Christ-centered Christian bears the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:19-21, 22-23), and avoids the works of the flesh (Gal 5:19-21). Indeed, verse 21 says that a person who does those fleshly things “*will not inherit the kingdom of God.*” Does that mean that Christians must be perfect to obtain the kingdom? No, they simply must remain in a repentant, confessing, attitude:

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us (1 John 1:8-10).

But without the law, would we know what

sin is? Would we know that adultery is wrong without the law and the teachings of Christ? Left to their own reasoning, some people, or whole societies—even Christians—conclude adultery is not sin.

What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, “You shall not covet” (Romans 7:7).

Christ died for our sins. If He eliminated the law, then He eliminated the need for His sacrifice, because without law, there is no sin. The Bible is specific about what Christ did:

Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”), (Galatians 3:13).

...having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross (Colossians 2:14).

being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, (Romans 3:24,25).

The “curse”, the “requirements... against us” and the “passing over” our sins all refer to the penalty of the law. That is what Christ has redeemed us from. Reality bears that out! Since the collapse of the Jewish state in the generation after Christ, the penalties of the law have not been carried out by God or mankind. The death penalty for adultery, homosexuality, witchcraft, etc. is no longer enforced. People are no longer cast out of their nation for failing to bring certain offerings, breaking the Sabbath, missing the Feast Days, etc.

Romans 13 upholds the need for civil governments to punish evil-doers—even though they were not following biblical law, and at the same time commands believers to follow the Ten Commandments and Golden Rule. This is exactly as we read above, the curse or penalties of the Biblical law are no

longer being enforced, having been replaced with man’s civil law (a mixture of good and bad), but the more important requirement for believers is obeying God and keeping His law in the spirit. We do this because we love God and love our fellow man:

But the Holy Spirit also witnesses to us; for after He had said before, “This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them,” (Hebrews 10:15)

But were these Old Testament commands good and righteous? “*My tongue shall speak of Your word, For all Your commandments are righteousness*” (Psalm 119:172). “*Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good*” (Romans 7:12). All of Psalm 119 is about the goodness of God’s laws. This article would be 10 times its size if we included every Bible verse expounding on the goodness and righteousness of the laws of God.

For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries (Hebrews 10:26).

Now that we understand that law-keeping does not save us, that the penalties of the law are no longer being carried out, but that the law is righteous and holy, what do we do? It is obvious that the great spiritual principles of the Ten Commandments still stand (Exodus 20:1-17). They never contained penalties to begin with. On the opposite side of the fence, Hebrews 7-10 gives a thorough explanation of why it is no longer necessary to offer animal sacrifices. They were good, but Christ, a much better Sacrifice, has replaced them.

So what about the biblical Feast Days themselves? Have they been replaced by something better? Maybe Christmas, Easter, Halloween, Valentines Day, etc? A little study will show that these days were never kept in the New Testament, but they all came from non-Christian religions and contain many unbiblical aspects. Whereas the Bible demonstrates that the Feast days were planned at the creation of the Earth, and continued throughout the New Testament.

Genesis 1:14, properly translated in the New Jerusalem Bible says: “God said, ‘Let there be lights in the vault of heaven to divide day from night, and let them indicate **festivals**, days and years’” Any concordance or interlinear will show that the Hebrew word here for “festivals” is *moed* (Strong’s #4150), which means “appointed times” and is used throughout the Bible for the biblical Feast Days. While many regard the Passover when Moses and the Israelites left Egypt as the “first Passover”, Exodus 12:41 says it occurred on the same day of the year (another Passover) as when a promised period of time began 430 years before. Many Bible scholars believe this Passover 430 prior to Moses’ was at the meeting of Melchizedek and Abraham (Genesis 14-15), where Abraham was told it would take four generations for his descendants to return there, and where Abraham shared bread and wine with Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18)—a Passover-like service!

Back to the New Testament, God chose a Feast Day service on Pentecost to pour out his Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-8). Do we think the early church decided to “never keep Pentecost again”? Or did they look forward to a renewed outpouring every year, as well as a time to each their children and

new believers about what happened on that first Pentecost after Christ’s death? Luke, a non-Jew, writing the book of Acts to the Greek “Theophilus” (Acts 1:1), uses the Feast days simply to denote times of the year, expecting his readers to know exactly when they are: the Days of Unleavened Bread (Acts 12:3; 20:6), Passover (Acts 12:4—King James “Easter” here is a translation error that virtually every other translation corrects), Pentecost (Acts 20:16) and “the Fast” or Day of Atonement (Acts 27:9). It is interesting that most Christians today, who do not observe the biblical Feast Days, do not know what time of year these events occurred. But even children of Christians who have grown up keeping the Feast Days all know. Luke chose these words, rather than the Greek words for seasons of the year.

The Apostle Paul, in writing to the many non-Jews in the Corinthian church, taught that “Christ is our Passover”, explained the symbolism of the Days of unleavened bread and used the exact same Greek expression in his command to “keep the Feast” that is found the Greek Septuagint, the Old Testament used by the Corinthians:

*Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore **let us keep the feast**, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth* (1 Corinthians 5:6-8).

Paul also refers to the day of Pentecost in 1 Corinthians 16:7-9. Most Christian writers today would never use Feasts for times of the year or analogies because neither they nor their readers have observed these days. Beside these proofs, there are many prophetic references to Feast days in both Old and New Testaments, with a definite statement that when Christ returns, the Feast of Tabernacles will be kept (Zechariah 14:3-4, 16-21).

When we clearly see that the New Testament church was a Feast-keeping church, then it is easy to understand Colossians 2:16-17:

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Kingdom Misconceptions
Continued from page 7

Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years (Revelation 20:6).

And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him (Revelation 22:3).

The Greek word to *serve* suggests a priestly service.

What service does the Royal Priesthood offer the King? Is it carrying out mundane tasks, and delivering messages? Not so.

They serve Him by pleasing Him by who they are, by how they can identify with Him through their mutual bond. They know His wishes and desires. They continue to enhance His life and increase his connection with His creation and with life. After all, is that not what priests do?

They are instrumental in bringing glory to the Throne of God, for they too are there, they are also royalty.

For this writer, I cannot imagine a higher experience or expression of living to be of the Royal Priesthood. There is nothing greater mentioned in scripture or in the imagination.

Summary

Jesus Christ spoke of His Father’s wishes: But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him (John 4:23).

The apostle Paul wrote of the Father’s wishes for us:

For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit Himself bears witness

with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us (Romans 8:14-18).

Paul writes that we will inherit the Universe, the promise, the Kingdom, Eternal life and that we would share in the glory.

Indeed God seeks to enhance His life. And He wants to enhance yours too. We live in a fallen world and ideas of God and the Kingdom will always be around us. This does not change the reality of the Kingdom of God, which is moving along according to plan.

The Gospel of the Kingdom is about opportunity. The invitation to the Kingdom is to be part of the glorification of God. To me this is a whole lot of Good News. Our calling is to proclaim it right, and for the right reasons.



THE FIRST COMMANDMENT: Perfecting Love For God

(Second Installment of the Beginning excerpt from “Ten Words” project soon to be available in eBook.)
(for the first Installment see *SVM* Winter 2012 Edition)

Ample Evidence of God’s Instructions

There is ample evidence that the Ten Commandments are indeed the authoritative guide to humanity for right living. The Bible states that the truth of a matter under investigation must be established by the mouth of two or three witnesses (cf. Deuteronomy 19:15). Well, so far, we’ve heard the scriptural testimony as to the enormous spiritual importance of the Ten Commandments from Moses, Solomon, the apostles John and Paul, and even Jesus Christ himself. Is that enough for you? It ought to be sufficient for anyone who dares call himself or herself a Christian. But if not, then consider this: the Ten Commandments were neither the creative idea nor first spoken nor written down first by any human leader of the people of God. Far from it! So who did create this remarkable, enduring moral code that has had such a profound effect on such a large multitude of people during the last 3,500 years?

Moses called all the people of Israel together and said, “Listen carefully, Israel. Hear the decrees and regulations I am giving you today, so you may learn them and obey them! The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Mount Sinai. The LORD did not make this covenant with our ancestors, but with all of us who are alive today. At the mountain the LORD spoke to you face to face from the heart of the fire. I stood as an intermediary between you and the LORD, for you were afraid of the fire and did not want to approach the mountain. He spoke to me, and I passed His words on to you. This is what He said: ‘I am the LORD your God, who rescued you from the land of

Egypt, the place of your slavery. You must not have any other god but Me”” (Deuteronomy 5: 1-7).

An everlasting covenant is also being made with us, too, who have a relationship with God the Father. The Israelites had ample physical evidence to perceive exactly with whom they were getting involved at Mt. Sinai. They didn’t doubt that a great supernatural Being spoke directly to them from the mountaintop. It was a dramatic theophany, a revealing of the invisible God to the material world that was accompanied by lightening, thunder, the sound of the trumpet and then the voice of God speaking to them about the foundations of their dynamic covenantal relationship, summarized in what the Hebrews later ironically called the “ten words.”

In the 21st Century, we too, have had a theophany [*a visible manifestation of a deity*] of God to our world by our growing grasp of His scientific marvels of nature, and the complexity of His dynamic but ordered universe that runs on invisible law. Through these things God plainly speaks to us just as He spoke to the ancient Israelites at Sinai. Nevertheless, today, many prefer to remain willfully blind. With such people the Bible’s God does indeed have a bone to pick.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For His invisible attributes, namely, His eternal

power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools... (Romans 1:18-22 ESV).

The God who made all this world’s wonders says to each of us just as He did to the ancient Israelites, “I love you. I remembered you. I delivered you from the slavery of sin. I will yet help you again when you need me in the future. So just have a little faith, today, to believe and obey Me.” As Christians, the children of God, shouldn’t we love God and His son Jesus Christ, enough to be willing to live by those same simple “ten words?”

Satan tested Christ on this issue of obedience. Since Jesus was fully human He could have sinned by not being wholly loyal to God the Father. But if Jesus had sinned, then we would have been without a Savior since He could not have been the perfect holy sacrifice needed to cover the sins of all humanity. So, Satan tried to entrap Him by appealing to the typical human weaknesses of vanity and the lust for power:

Next the devil took Him to the peak of a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory “I will give it all to You,” he said, “If You will kneel down and worship me. “Get out of here, Satan,” Jesus told him. “For the Scriptures say, ‘You must worship the LORD your God and

serve only Him. Then the devil went away, and angels came and took care of Jesus (Matthew 4:8-11).

First thing on Satan's agenda was to get Jesus to bow down and worship the Adversary of God – to disregard the first commandment. I can imagine Hitler, Stalin, Mao Zedong, Pol Pot and every other vicious, mass-murdering fiend who ever has been, has been offered the same evil proposition. Most of them took Satan up on his offer and bowed down and worshipped the father of lies, hate, and murder. And for their fealty, such human tyrants received for a little while a certain kingdom, a certain power and authority on this earth. But Christ our Savior decided to put God first, and would not be disloyal to the only true God. How about you?

When God Is Not Our Only Authority

What does it mean to exclusively worship Israel's God, the Bible's God? Obviously, it means to forsake any other so-called gods or any other object that a corrupt humanity worships with their time, money, and any other form of devotion. God calls upon His people to enter into an exclusive spiritual relationship with Him. Perhaps the easiest analogy one can draw to make this clear is that of human marriage. During most marriage ceremonies both bride and groom mutually promise to forsake all other lovers and to be faithful to each other until death. The couple is to have an exclusive, faithful love relationship with just each other. There is to be no *ménage à trois*, no lovers on the side. This is what the Bible's God expects of those who would live in covenant with Him.

For the LORD had made a covenant with the descendants of Jacob and commanded them: "Do not worship any other gods or bow before them or serve them or offer sacrifices to them. But worship only the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt with great strength and a powerful arm. Bow down to Him alone, and offer

sacrifices only to Him. Be careful at all times to obey the decrees, regulations, instructions, and commands that He wrote for you. You must not worship other gods. Do not forget the covenant I made with you, and do not worship other gods. You must worship only the LORD your God. He is the one who will rescue you from all your enemies" (2 Kings 17:35-39).

Notice the first thing we are given in the above passage is a reminder to God's people that they and their children had already entered into a solemn, spiritually binding relationship with their Creator.



The terms of this divine covenant relationship insisted that they neither submit themselves to anyone else as their top authority (a "false god"), nor give in to whatever coercive pressure they might be feeling from that false authority to do what they knew was wrong. God then identified Himself once more to His people by saying, essentially, "I'm the One who stood up for you against the bullies who were abusing you. So show me a little respect and follow my directions and my rules instead of theirs." God then repeats once again His major point: remember our relationship and only follow Me because I'll look out for you. Don't be taken in by the deceivers.

Why was God so repetitive in 2 Kings 17? Well, far too many of the people of ancient Israel were blockheads! They were slow learners. Incredibly, even though Christians are given their pre-figurative historical example to learn from, most of us, as well, just don't get it! Many Christians ignore our Maker's "ten words" just like our ancestors in the faith. As the apostle Paul taught:

I want you to remember, my friends, what happened to our ancestors who followed Moses. They were all under the protection of the cloud, and all passed safely through the Red Sea. In

the cloud and in the sea they were all baptized as followers of Moses. All ate the same spiritual bread and drank the same spiritual drink. They drank from the spiritual Rock that went with them; and that Rock was Christ Himself. But even then God was not pleased with most of them, and so their dead bodies were scattered over the desert. Now, all of this is an example for us, to warn us not to desire evil things, as they did, nor to worship idols, as some of them did. As the scripture says, the people sat down to a feast which turned into an orgy of drinking and sex. We must not be guilty of sexual immorality, as some of them were—and in one day twenty-three

thousand of them fell dead. We must not put the Lord to the test, as some of them did—and they were killed by snakes. We must not complain, as some of them did—and they were destroyed by the Angel of Death. All these things happened to them as examples for others, and they were written down as a warning for us. For we live at a time when the end is about to come. If you think you are standing firm you had better be careful that you do not fall (1 Corinthians 10:1-12 Good News Translation).

Who are these false gods, deceptive lords, and abusive masters who seem to be able to seduce the people of God practically at will? In modern terms such “idols” could be any person, group, government, ideology, or competing un-Scriptural religion that would seek to divert us away from God’s own scripturally taught moral and ethical standards. The modern world’s clever equivalents to the ancient world’s leering idols are the secularism that believes in neither truth nor revelation, and the multiculturalism that believes all religions are the same. In the 21st Century idolatry abounds on Wall Street, and Main Street, in our Universities and most certainly in Hollywood, and other centres of human power and influence around the world. Philosophical traps for the unwary are cleverly set for lukewarm Christians who are not wholly committed to the Creator God! Christ understood this basic issue very clearly and warned his disciples to watch out!

You can't worship two gods at once. Loving one god, you'll end up hating the other. Adoration of one feeds contempt for the other. You can't worship God and money both (Matthew 6:24 The Message).

The Bible’s God claims exclusive ownership rights to those who have cut a spiritual covenant with Him. Consequently you cannot worship any other god, idea, or thing but the LORD without incurring sin. And what is the consequence of sin as opposed to living by God’s grace in

faithful covenant with the Holy One?

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23 ESV).

The Bible’s true God should be our final authority. He is the only One we must absolutely please and obey, and the only One who should motivate us to live the way we do.

So, who has ownership rights to your life? Is it your boss, your parents, your government officials, or your church leaders? There is a lot of interesting scientific research into the problem of obedience and authority. Margaret Hefernan reflects on these questions in her book *Willful Blindness*:

The traditional argument in favor of hierarchies and obedience is part of the social contract. It is worth sacrificing some degree of individuality in order to insure the safety and privileges achieved only by the group. More recently, psychologists have come to understand that this social contract may be more than just utilitarian. A significant component of human happiness, they say, lies in being able to contribute to a purpose larger than oneself. Because in the developed world, most of us can satisfy our immediate, hedonic needs quite easily, doing so soon ceases to feel very rewarding. We search for a purpose bigger than ourselves. Very few people can achieve greater purpose alone (Willful Blindness, Doubleday Canada, 2011, p.110).

Christians do have a greater purpose and it does make us happier and healthier. But in order to accomplish this purpose we generally need to cooperate with others in larger groups, formally organized or not, in order to speak and act more effectively. This is the reason there are so many churches and other non-profit organizations. Yet, there can be a danger here. What do we trade for the sake of achieving a larger purpose by joining with and participating in a group? Can even subtle, unspoken pressures arising from the group’s leaders and peers run

contrary on occasion to the First Commandment’s clear call to put the Bible’s God and His values first in everything we do?

The renowned psychologist of obedience was Stanley Milgram. He conducted some of the most famous psychology experiments in the 1960s. He sought to understand why and whether individuals would obey authority even when it was morally repugnant. Stanley Milgram created an electric ‘shock generator’ with 30 switches. The switches were progressively delineated in 15-volt increments, ranging from 15 to 450 volts. He wondered, “For how long will someone continue to give shocks to another person if they are told to do so, even if they thought they could be seriously hurt?” (<http://www.experiment-resources.com/stanley-milgram>)

This experiment’s results shocked and troubled Milgram. The data revealed that 65 percent of volunteers in his experiment, a clear majority, were willing to obey perceived authority even though they thought they were causing severe pain to others.

More experiments structured according to the Milgram model were conducted in 2006. The new research showed that people in the 21st Century were even more conforming, even more willing to go along and cause others pain than those in the 1960s experiments. The bottom line is that the later researchers, just like Milgram, found that most of their test subjects readily lost the compassionate part of their humanity under the influence of a perceived authority.

When we are part of a group, we can experience a shift of focus to conform to some perceived authority. Our mindset in group mode seems to naturally focus on how well do we live up to the expectations of a group’s leaders and peers. We seem to easily lose sight of a higher moral compass. This is pretty scary stuff! And it all has a direct bearing on what happens when we place wrong authorities (false gods) in our lives.

What would your neighbors do about you, if some “authority” in the name of public safety and order tells them to denounce all trouble-makers including Christians who don’t enthusiastically support the government, would they turn you over to the police. Would your neighbors go along? Don’t think it could never happen. After all, in the 1930s this is what happened to the baptized Christian converts of Jewish ancestry, as well as, the whole Jewish population of Nazi Germany.

This is why we can only have God the Father and Jesus Christ as our authority. We should never, as a Christian, purposefully inflict pain on others as in the Milgram experiment if God is our sole authority. The teachings of God and the Bible must be prioritized ahead of those of government, society, community, or even church organization.

Not surprisingly, the problem of humanity not recognizing and correctly prioritizing the right authority in their life didn’t just begin in the 20th Century.

Elijah: If God is God Alone?

In a time when the nation of ancient Israel had fallen into syncretistic worship of the “Lord/Baal,” the people had lost sight of the one true God and what their God required of them – His people. They had adopted a blended form of worship that allowed them to decide for themselves the way they should worship. They only paid lip-service to the teachings of the Holy Scriptures. In a way that Stanley Milgram could appreciate, Elijah was prompted by God to perform an experiment to show Israel who should be their only authority:

So Obadiah went to tell Ahab that Elijah had come, and Ahab went out to meet Elijah. When Ahab saw him, he exclaimed, “So, is it really you, you troublemaker of Israel?”

“I have made no trouble for Israel,” Elijah replied. “You and your family are the troublemakers, for you have

refused to obey the commands of the LORD and have worshiped the images of Baal instead. Now summon all Israel to join me at Mount Carmel, along with the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah who are supported by Jezebel. So Ahab summoned all the people of Israel and the prophets to Mount Carmel. Then Elijah stood in front of them and said, “How much longer will you waver, hobbling between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him! But if Baal is God, then follow him!” But the people were completely silent. Then Elijah said to them, “I am the only prophet of the LORD who is left, but Baal has 450 prophets. Now bring two bulls. The prophets of Baal may choose whichever one they wish and cut it into pieces and lay it on the wood of their altar, but without setting fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood on the altar, but not set fire to it. Then call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the LORD. The god who answers by setting fire to the wood is the true God!” And all the people agreed. Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “You go first, for there are many of you. Choose one of the bulls, and prepare it and call on the name of your god. But do not set fire to the wood.” So they prepared one of the bulls and placed it on the altar. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning until noontime, shouting, “O Baal, answer us!” But there was no reply of any kind. Then they danced, hobbling around the altar they had made. About noontime Elijah began mocking them. “You’ll have to shout louder,” he scoffed, “for surely he is a god! Perhaps he is daydreaming, or is relieving himself. Or maybe he is away on a trip, or is asleep and needs to be wakened!” So they shouted louder, and following their normal custom, they cut themselves with knives and swords until the blood gushed out. They raved all afternoon until the time of the evening sacrifice, but still there was no sound, no reply, no response (1 Kings 18:16-29).

“Do you have any other authority in your life?” Elijah asked, in essence, of ancient

Israel. The question remains valid for us, today, as well. Is the political correctness of certain high status people in your particular circle of associates, or community, or in the media, or your church group – are they your authority? Or is the God of the Bible your first authority and His commands your prime directives? The syncretistic Lord/Baal was an authority for most people in Elijah’s time. At the beginning of his ministry, few people believed as Elijah did in God’s absolute divine authority. But that changed a bit by the end of Elijah’s tour de force.

Today, as in the past, the people of God have been chosen to believe in God, to witness to His goodness by living the way of life taught by the Scriptures in obedience to Him. In reality, now as thousands of years ago, there is no other God like the LORD our God. Still, just as most people in ancient Israel chose to believe a lie time and time again, so, today, many indulge themselves with willful blindness, choosing the path of least resistance and compromise. We, who are part of God’s covenant people, His witnesses, should be different:

“But you are My witnesses, O Israel!” says the LORD. “You are My servant. You have been chosen to know Me, believe in Me, and understand that I alone am God. There is no other God — there never has been, and there never will be. I, yes I, am the LORD, and there is no other Savior (Isaiah 43:10-11).

Then Elijah called to the people, “Come over here!” They all crowded around him as he repaired the altar of the LORD that had been torn down. He took twelve stones, one to represent each of the tribes of Israel, and he used the stones to rebuild the altar in the name of the LORD. Then he dug a trench around the altar large enough to hold about three gallons. He piled wood on the altar, cut the bull into pieces, and laid the pieces on the wood.

Then he said, “Fill four large jars with water, and pour the water over the offering and the wood.”

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Ask Norm!



Questions?
asknorm@shepherdsvoicemagazine.org

Dear Norm,
(February 11, 2012)

[Please send me Shepherd's Voice Magazine.]

I was born and raised in Glasgow, Scotland. Joined the British Army, Royal Army Medical Corps, and took a nursing degree. I stayed in Germany 10 years. When I returned to the UK it was very difficult to speak English again! I went to Portland Bible College and got my BA in Theology and then stayed another 3 years to complete a ministry training course.

My religious beliefs would brand me as a heretic:

1. My religious beliefs would brand me as a heretic:
2. I believe that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone for Christ's sake alone.
3. I am a committed Five Point Calvinist.
4. I hold the doctrine of Supralapsarianism.
5. I am an Evangelical Unitarian (I believe the doctrine of the Trinity is utter blasphemy and that those who worship Jesus as God are committing idolatry)
6. I keep the seventh day Sabbath.
7. I observe the Biblical Clean and Unclean food laws.
8. I Believe in Conditional Immortality.
9. Postmillennialist
10. I believe in Replacement Theology (the church has replaced Israel)
11. I am against Christian Zionism and do not believe that Christians should support the state of Israel.
12. I am a continuationist (spiritual gifts still function in the church today).
13. I have a very low Satanology.
14. I am against celebrating pagan feast days i.e. Christmas, Halloween, and Easter.

— John, Vancouver, Wash.

Dear John:

Well, you certainly are a heretic. As you may well know, our word "heresy" is from the Greek *haireisis*, which means making a choice or division. You have certainly made a choice as to what you believe, and yours may well be different from any other believer on earth!

But, alas, your choice # 1 puts you in company with a great many believers throughout the world.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Salvation is not based upon our works, whether those works be how we treat our neighbor, or how we study our doctrines. The Bible does not contain a doctrinal list required for salvation, nor is there any place where it indicates people will lose salvation because they had some lesser point of doctrine wrong. Nevertheless, if Christ is in us, we will do His works (Colossians 1:27; Philippians 2:13). Truth is important. Many other verses, like 1 Corinthians 3:10-15, show that salvation and reward for works are different. We know that there is a "better resurrection"

(Hebrew 11:35; Luke 12:42-48; Revelation 20:4-6).

Sabbath, Meats and Holidays

I will deal with some of the other easy ones first, # 5, # 6 and # 13. I believe that the seventh day Sabbath, the Biblical Feast days, and the clean food laws continued right through the New Testament on to today. They do not earn salvation, but Christ and the apostles followed them, so we can, also. I believe Christ was born during the Feast of Tabernacles: "And the Word became flesh, and did tabernacle among us..." (John 1:14; YLT). We should teach His birth then, not in December or with Yule logs, mistletoe kisses and other Pagan traditions. Believers should remember the death of Christ at Passover and his resurrection on the Feast of Firstfruits or Wavesheaf day, not Easter. Halloween is a night commemorating demonic practices and has no place in Christianity.

Trinity & Nature of Christ

On # 4, it is obvious that the word "trinity" is not in the Bible and the major KJV verses that support the concept were late additions that nearly every modern translation properly leaves out (1 John 5:7-8). When Stephen saw into heaven, he saw the Father and Jesus, not three (Acts 7:56). Nearly every letter of

Paul is written in the name of “God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ”. The Holy Spirit is God’s power in us, not a separate entity.

Because Christ humbled himself as a human servant (Phillipians 2:7), it is understandable why some people, both in the Bible and now, do not see Him as God. This writer has seen errors made on both sides of arguments about the deity of Christ. But I am convinced by these and numerous other scriptures that Christ is God and is worshiped as God (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 14:33; 28-18, Luke 24:52; John 5:23; 9:38; 10:30; 12:45; 14:6, 9-10; 17:5; 20:28; Acts 7:59; 2 Corinthians 4:4; Phillipians 2:6,9-11, Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3-8; Revelation 5:9-14).

When we pray in Christ’s name, He promises to answer the prayer Himself (John 14:13-14). If we have a question about a biblical commandment we can always look at the examples. In the scriptures where people worshiped Christ, they were never corrected. Whereas, when John mistakenly worshiped an angel, he was gently corrected (Revelation 22:9)

Prophecy, Spiritual Gifts and Nation of Israel

We will do # 8 and # 11 together because the latter answers the former. The biblical spiritual gifts must be continued to our time. We cannot understand the functioning of the Church without them. There is no hint in the Bible that they will somehow end. Rather, “...you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures” (James 4:2-3). For many, the church is either a place of book learning or a political party, not the radically different

way of life the Bible describes. Once we accept that God still places spiritual gifts in the church (Romans 12:6, 1 Corinthians 12 & 14; Ephesians 4; 1 Peter 4:10-11), we do not need to adopt a school of prophetic interpretation, but can rely on our Father to show us what He will do through His prophets (Amos 3:7; 1 Corinthians 4:31, 39). The nature of prophecy is conditional, based upon the repentance of the people involved (Jeremiah 18:7-10). God even changed one prophecy at the request of Moses

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 (Philippians 2:9-11).

(Numbers 14:11-20). What good is it for us to lay out a prophetic scenario from the Bible when our Father may not yet have decided how He will fulfill all His prophecies yet?

9 and # 10 also go together. The Old Testament covenants promise prosperity and posterity for physical obedience. The New Testament teaches eternal life resulting from faith in Christ and total submission to God. These teachings are not mutually exclusive. God can fulfill his promises to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the twelve tribes (Genesis 48-49; Deuteronomy 33), David (2 Samuel 7:12-16) and many others, and still offer salvation to both Israel and all mankind. I agree that Christian Zionism is a mistake. It is generally based on prophetic ideas that the Jews must return

to the land of Palestine, and maybe build a temple before Christ returns, so we have to hurry them up and help them do that. God is not anxious for us to fulfill prophecy for Him; He wants us to be righteous! The nation called Israel today is not appreciably more righteous than Israel under the kings or than the Jews at the time of Christ. They are as likely to be judged for their sin now as the nations were in the past.

Who’s Good and Who’s Bad

I will not discuss # 2, # 3 and # 7 in any detail. While it is not inherently wrong to consider complex questions of the nature of sin and who will be saved, the clear teaching of the Bible is not to render judgments on the reward or punishment of certain classes of people, but to teach and practice righteousness as we understand it (Luke 9:49-50; Romans 14:1-4; 1 Corinthians 4:5; Phillipians Revelation 2-3). I have observed that those whose studies take them into great detail about which group of people will be saved or receive the greatest reward, invariably find themselves to be in the best group. It seems that their humility and diligence to serve God with their whole heart wanes, because after all, they are already in the best group of believers. When people asked Christ, “who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven,” He did not name names or give them a doctrinal definition, but taught them something they needed to learn to better obtain the Kingdom (Matthew 18:1-14). We should do the same.

Lastly, in regard to # 12, a “low satanology”: Satan is about as low as one could go! We are looking forward to his thousand year imprisonment! (Revelation 20:2-3).



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Children of God

Part 3 — *Babes in Arms, Babes in Christ*

This article must not be dismissed as “women stuff”. Even though nature itself teaches women are the primary caregivers for babies, men need to understand the workings of baby care so they can properly lead their families, lead in congregations, preach the gospel and bring new converts to Christ. Ultimately, knowing how to care for babies is necessary to become a king and priest and to rule nations and congregations with Christ at His return (Matthew 23:37; 2 Timothy 2:14; Revelation 1:6; 5:10).

What do positions of great power have to do with baby-care? Let us read about them from the Master of both:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:1-4).

Suppose someone asked us, “Who is the greatest spiritual leader in the world today?” Or, “Other than Christ and the Apostles, who will be greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?” We might begin to put forth names of people we have read about, or characters from the Scripture. Here, though, Christ declined to talk about things that our heavenly Father will determine (Matthew 20:23), and concentrated on what we need to know to be in His Kingdom. Jesus taught the attitude of child-like humility which we must have. The word for “little child” here refers to the

toddler age—old enough to understand Jesus’ request and to run to Jesus on his own, but well before the “know it all stage” that some children reach in their middle elementary years. Children of this age know that they are not powerful, but reliant on others for many things. They are often loving and thankful. We need that attitude toward our Father in Heaven on a daily basis. We need to realize all we have and ever will achieve is because of His provision. But there is much more to this lesson than developing child-like humility. Jesus was able to call a child to Himself; He almost certainly knew his name. Do we know the names of the children of our friends or of the children in our congregations? The child was not afraid to come to Him. Christ had a peaceful voice and manner that attracted children. He was able to pick the child up and “set him in the midst”. We all need to be **childlike to God**, but maturing believers need to be **godlike to children**. Let us keep reading the story from above:

“Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me. But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:5-6).

When we receive a child in Christ’s name, we must treat him or her as Christ would. We cannot say, “Get out of my way kid, I’ve got important things to do.” Jesus’ pronouncement upon those who offend “little ones” is one of the more graphic forms of death mentioned in the Bible. This statement is usually applied as a spiritual analogy to how mature believers must be careful not to

offend new believers, and rightly so. But why would Christ use a spiritual analogy if the literal statement is not also true? The Greek word for “little ones” here is different than “little child”, above. It is *micros*, from which we get our word “micro” and just means “small”. It would refer to newborn babies and older, and by analogy, those who are new believers. Every person is made in the image of God (Gen 1:27) and is deserving of respect at whatever place they are in their development. We need to respect even the youngest as persons, and interact with them at a level they are capable of understanding. We need patience with their inabilities. Just because a youngster is not yet able to talk or is too scared to talk does not stop us from looking at them and smiling, saying “hello” or making some other gesture that acknowledges their presence and value as a person.

Jesus Christ continues with His very sharp words about those who would offend small children. These words are familiar to many Christians, but many forget they are clearly in the context of how we treat literal physical children as well as new believers:

“Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes! If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire. Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven

their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven. For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost” (Matthew 18:7-11).

Here we find out even the youngest of children have angels assigned to them (see also Acts 12:15). Every person, no matter how small they are now, has the potential to be saved, to receive eternal life (2 Peter 3:9; 1 John 2:2). Yet Christ is still not done talking about the way we treat the smallest human being among us. He continues on with the famous parable of the 99 and one sheep:

“What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying? And if he should find it, assuredly, I say to you, he rejoices more over that sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish (Matthew 18:12-14).

Even the person who ranks in the bottom 1% of value to us is still someone whom our Father thinks about and will go out of His way to care for.

Take Inventory

The rest of this article addresses practical questions about the “little ones” in your life: babes in arms as well as babes in Christ. While every point made here applies to one’s own children, they are addressed to everyone, because we all have contact with children among relatives, among friends, in congregations and among those we meet in the working world. Some men may protest, “This is primarily women’s work!” While it is true that most women are more skilled at dealing with babies than men, men ought to appreciate that and realize there is something men can learn from women here, not something to ignore. These principles apply to human babies

and “babes in Christ”. The men who lead congregations or other organizations would do well to understand and practice them.

Do you know the names of the babies and small children whom you encounter regularly? Do you want to know? When you encounter them, do you take time to smile at them, or interact with them in a way appropriate for their age? Do you talk in a friendly respectable manner, or do you “baby talk” them or talk down to them? If a baby looks away from you or ignores you, are you upset by the slight, or are you patient until next time? Do you ever hold babies, either to give their parents a break or to have a closer interaction? Do you know to support the head of a baby who is less than four months old? Are you willing to put mom’s blanket or rag on your shoulder when holding a baby who has just been fed and might spit up on you? Or are you willing to accept the mess he might accidentally make? Are you all right if a baby fills his diaper while you are holding him? Do you patiently get the needed help, or are you upset that such a thing happened? (Is this the baby’s fault?) We can ask a similar set of questions about new believers. Do we know who they are? Do we want to know? Do we try to talk to them at their beginning level of faith? Do we still treat them respectably even though they may be struggling with some significant problems we have long ago overcome? Are we patient if they do not learn quickly?

Do we interact with new believers even though they may embarrass us at times? If they treat us badly, are we strong enough not to stoop to their level? Are we willing for others to think badly of us in an effort to be a blessing to others, knowing that God knows the truth and intent of our hearts? When God takes care of His young children, He does all these things perfectly.

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sin-

ners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

Love Them, Not Just Want Them to Love You

People who have trouble holding babies will frequently say something like: “Babies don’t like me.” That is a big part of the problem. When a person picks up a baby, he should not be thinking, “Is this baby going to like me?” He should be thinking that he likes this baby and wants to be nice to him. While little babies cannot talk, they seem to be very perceptive of the attitudes of those that take care of them. This does not mean that every time a baby cries when someone picks her up that the person is somehow deficient. Babies can learn to be fussy and selfish at an early age. But in general, people who have Christian love for children, and who have a purpose to do them good, can pick up or talk to most children without difficulty. It is actually helpful to have something specific to do with them—to show them something interesting, get a toy for them, etc. Even if the child cries or tries to get away, the person confident that he is doing the right thing can either endure the fuss or gracefully put the child down to try a again another day.

It is much the same for mature Christians dealing with new believers. If the Christian leader mainly hopes that his knowledge and authority will be recognized by the new Christians, he will find himself in frequent difficulty. If he has a mission to help and serve, to do what is good for the new Christians, whether they understand it yet or not, he can be confident that he is doing the right thing. Even if they rebel at the leader’s righteous approach, the leader can have hope that they will return another time. Our Father in Heaven certainly showed His love to us first. While He is worthy of our adoration and praise, He created the earth, gave us His words and paid for our sins long before we began to listen to Him.

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The Law and the Book of Ruth

The Book of Ruth is a lovely little book in which a young widow named Ruth meets a man named Boaz, they eventually get married, and have a son who becomes the grandfather to the celebrated King David. Although this book is set in the time of the judges in which “*every man did what was right in his own eyes,*” its characters display the virtues of religious conversion, loyalty, generosity, responsibility, hard work, purity, courtesy, and thoroughness. Believe it or not, this book even has much to say about the law.



Scribe's Square

The story begins with a famine in the city of Bethlehem which belongs to the Israelite tribe of Judah. Such famines occurred fairly often in that region where crops depended on both the amount and frequencies of early and latter rains (Genesis 12:10; Genesis 26:1; Jeremiah 5:24; Hosea 6:3; Deuteronomy 11:10-14). Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their two sons, Kilion and Mahlon, leave Bethlehem for the land of Moab. Elimelech promptly dies and his sons marry Moabite women. Then, the sons both die, leaving behind Naomi and her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth.

Noami decides to return to Bethlehem. She sets out for the land of Judah with her daughters-in-law, but somewhere along the way, she advises them to go back to Moab and remarry. Naomi does not want these two young women, who have the rest of their lives ahead of them, to be burdened with an older widow. But Orpah and Ruth wept loudly and proclaimed that they would both go back with Naomi to her people in Bethlehem. Naomi once again instructs the young women to go back to Moab, this time giving them a longer and firmer speech. Orpah reluctantly returns to her family in Moab, but Ruth clings to her mother-in-law. Naomi, for a third time, instructs Ruth to go back to Moab.

Ruth then gives one of the most touching discourses of all scripture: “*Entreat me not to leave you and to turn back from following you; wherever you go, there will I go; wherever you stay, there will I stay; your people shall be my people, and your God shall be my God; wherever you die, there will I die, and beside you will I be buried.*”

Some have suggested that Naomi’s husband should have never moved to Moab in the first place. They claim that his move resulted from lack of faith and that his death and his son’s deaths were punishments from Yahweh. This is pure speculation, however, because there is nothing in the Bible attributing these men’s deaths to divine disapproval.

(By the way, the Book of Ruth is the source of the most famous misspelled Biblical name in modern history. When American talk show host, media proprietor, actress, producer, and philanthropist Oprah Winfrey was born in 1954, she was named after Orpah, the woman from the book of Ruth. Her birth certificate actually reads, “Orpah Gail Winfrey.” But because her family members often mispronounced and misspelled her name, the name “Oprah” stuck and she has used it ever since.)

Noami and Ruth return to Bethlehem during the beginning of the barley harvest. Ruth goes out to glean in the fields, collecting the grain left behind by the other harvesters. By time and chance, Ruth comes upon a field belonging to a wealthy man named Boaz, who was related to her deceased husband (Ruth 2:1-3).

Boaz shows up in the field and learns that Naomi’s daughter-in-law has been gleaning. He immediately invites Ruth to drink of his water and continue gleaning in his fields, all his fields. He even orders all his employees to leave extra stalks for Ruth and not to bother her while she gleans. When Ruth asks why Boaz is being so kind to her, he says that it is because of the reports he has heard concerning Ruth forsaking her own people to accompany and care for Naomi. Ruth apparently goes back and tells Naomi about Boaz’s kindness (Ruth 2:4-23).

One day, Naomi decides that it is time for Ruth to remarry. She believes that Boaz, who was related to their husbands and who so graciously allowed Ruth to glean in his fields, is the ideal candidate. She sends Ruth to Boaz by night to ask Boaz

for protection in marriage. Boaz is willing to marry Ruth and redeem her family's name, but there is a closer male relative of her late husband out there who has the right of first refusal (Ruth 3).

Boaz assembles the town elders as well as witnesses and negotiates with his kinsman. Boaz informs his relative that the relative has the right to marry Ruth and buy her family's land, but any son he has with Ruth will inherit the land as an heir of Ruth's first husband Mahlon. The kinsman agrees to redeem all Elimelech's land, but he is not willing to marry Ruth in fear of jeopardizing his own inheritance. The kinsman then assigns to Boaz the right to marry Ruth and redeem Elimelech's land. The kinsman seals the deal by removing one of his sandals.

The elders of Bethlehem approve and the citizens thereof cheer Boaz's announcement that he will be marrying Ruth, wishing that his house flourish like the "House of Perez." The women of Bethlehem congratulate Naomi, telling her that her daughter-in-law Ruth loves her and is "better than seven sons to you." Ruth and Boaz marry. They have a son, whom they name Obed. Obed became the father of Jesse, who in turn became the father of King David. Ruth, thus, is also an ancestor of our Lord Jesus Christ, since Christ is descended from David.

Many of the transactions and occurrences in the Book of Ruth were made possible by the laws given to the Israelites through Moses.

Ruth was able to follow Naomi back to Bethlehem and assimilate into Israelite society because God made provisions for foreigners. Yahweh told the Israelites to love the alien because the Israelites were once aliens themselves in the land of Egypt (Deuteronomy 10:19). For the same reason, He also told them that they should neither vex nor oppress a stranger (Exodus 22:21). Not only were strangers to be treated kindly, they were allowed to fully participate in Israelite civil and religious society so long as they followed Israel's laws (Exodus 12:48-49; Numbers 9:14) The only privileges reserved to a natural born Israelite were the priesthood and rulership over the people of Israel (Deuteronomy 17:15, 1 Chronicles 24). The Israelites in Bethlehem at the time of Ruth evidently followed God's laws pertaining to strangers. Not only was Ruth not mistreated, but by the end of the story, Ruth was as much an Israelite as any of the women.

Another law coming into play in the Book of Ruth was the law concerning gleaning. Gleaning is the act of collecting leftover crops from a farmer's field after they have already been commercially harvested. Yahweh in Leviticus 19:9-10 provides that farmers must leave leftover gleanings in the corners of their fields for the needy. Accordingly, the poor, the orphans, and widows, including Ruth in Boaz's field, were allowed to collect the leftover crops without fear of being charged with trespassing or stealing (Leviticus 23:22 and Deuteronomy 24:19-20).

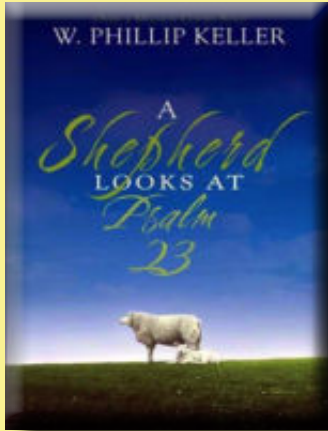
Perhaps the most important law applied in the Book of Ruth is the law of Levirate marriage. Under the law of Levirate marriage, if a married man dies without a male heir, the brother of that man must marry his deceased brother's widow. The widow and her "brother-in-law turned husband" must have a son together to continue the inheritance line of the deceased brother. The first-born son is thus considered an heir of the deceased brother—not the second husband (Deuteronomy 25:5-10).

Brothers were expected to carry out these duties because children were extremely important to the Israelites as well other ancient near east societies. Children led to productivity and security. They were a sign of status. Without children there was no one left to inherit a family's land. And remember, this land was the very land given to the people by God Himself.

This law designed to protect family inheritance was first codified in the book of Deuteronomy, but it existed in one form or another as early as the days of the patriarchs. Judah, the founding father of the tribe that bears his name, had three sons. When Judah's oldest son dies without an heir, both of Judah's other sons avoid their duties in giving their widowed sister-in-law, Tamar, a male heir. Tamar, desperate to have a son, resorts to trickery to conceive male heirs.

By the time of the judges, the law of levirate marriage was modified to include not only brothers-in-law, but other surviving relatives of an heirless decedent. Instead of merely a brother-in-law, the option to marry the widow is given to the descendant's closest kin. This, in addition to Boaz's kindness, is the reason why Naomi suggests Boaz as a husband for Ruth. But unlike the sons of his tribe's founding father, Boaz willingly accepts the obligation of marrying

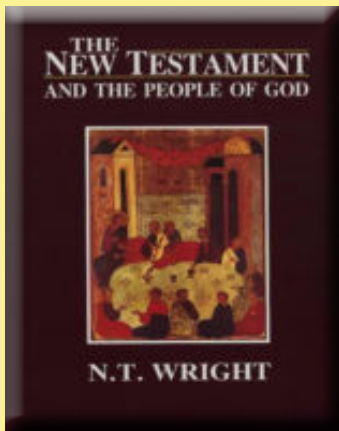
BOOK REVIEWS



A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23
by W. Phillip Keller

I highly recommend this book to anyone who really wants to understand the 23rd Psalm. I never truly understood it until I read *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* written by Phillip Keller. In each chapter Keller focuses on just one verse. He brings each verse to life with his insight as a shepherd himself. Most of us today, not having lived in a farming community or having a flock of sheep to care for, find it hard to picture and appreciate the language and imagery of Psalm 23 and to grasp the deeper meanings. Reading this book has given me so much more understanding and appreciation of Christ's loving and protective role for us in our daily lives as the Shepherd. It has also given me more awareness of us—the sheep of His pasture. Readers will be further encouraged and inspired by the words of the psalmist during times of trial from help of the added insights of Phillip Keller.

Jean Jantzen



The New Testament and the People of God
by N.T. Wright

For those wishing to probe the New Testament deeper there is no better book than N. T. Wright's "*The New Testament and the People of God*". While this book is more along the lines of a theology text book it offers an amazing amount of information on the social make up, beliefs and expectations of the people of God in the first century. It gives a good overview of Jewish history which provides the reader with a fresh look at the context of many passages of New Testament scripture that are so often glossed over by the traditional interpreters. This book is an invaluable tool for any serious Bible student, and recommended as mandatory reading for anyone who speaks on New Testament subject matters. It will be a book that will occupy the front seat in anyone's collection of Bible helps.

Jim B. Petersen

the childless widow Ruth. Boaz acts as the kinsman redeemer, but only after a closer relative refuses to exercise this option.

Please also note that Bethlehem was governed by town elders. Elders played an important part in local governance of the Israelites from the time of Moses all the way into the days of the kings. The concept of eldership was adopted by the New Testament church; and local congregations of God are overseen by elders to this very day (Exodus 3:16; Exodus 12:21; Exodus 24:1; Joshua 24:31; Judges 8:14; 2 Samuel 17:15; 1 Chronicles 11:3; Ezra 5:5-9; Ezra 6:7-14; Ezra 10:8-14; Joel 1:14; Acts 20:17, 28; 1Tim 5:17; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 5:1-2).

Finally, it is important to mention that the Book of Ruth serves as a plea for the inclusion of Gentiles into the assembly of Israel. This book perhaps served to place in perspective the Jewish nationalism that prevailed during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah in which these two leaders nullified the marriages between Israelite men and pagan wives. Not only was Ruth, a Moabite woman, accepted into the community of Bethlehem, the townspeople as well as the elders of the town blessed Boaz in his marriage, saying, "*May Yahweh make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah.*" The story of Ruth, as does other evidence in the Old and New Testament, proves that the law prohibiting ancient Israel from intermarrying was really a law against marriages between those of

different faiths, not different races and stands for the proposition--affirmed by our Lord and Savior and eventually accepted by his servant Peter--that "God is no respecter of persons; but in every nation he that feareth Him ... is acceptable to Him" (Acts 10:34-35).

The laws given in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy which structured ancient Israelite society may seem abstract and theoretical; and they probably even make for a boring read. But in the Book of Ruth, these laws are put into action. The people actually apply these laws to their lives, and they produce just and desirable results. God's law was not only applied to redeem one woman's family, but to continue a genealogy that led to the redemption of mankind.



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So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or new moon or Sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ (Colossians 2:16-17).

The questions raised among Feast-keeping believers at that time are very similar to the questions help by Feast-keeping believers today. The question is not about whether or not to keep the Feasts, new moons or Sabbaths any more than it was about whether or not to eat and drink. All of the believers ate, drank, and observed the Festivals, new moons and Sabbaths. The question was, "How should these things be done?" There was certainly no need for new believers to adopt all of the "Kosher" traditions of the Jewish people, but the apostles admonished them not to eat blood or things strangled (Acts 15: 20, 29; 21:25). There were questions about vegetarianism (Rom 14), eating meat offered to idols (1 Corinthians 8), and taking communion—symbolic bread and wine (1 Corinthians 10:16-23; 11:17-34).

What were the questions about the Feasts? The law commanded people to go to "the place that He shall choose"—Jerusalem—three times a year (Deut 14:23; 16:16-17; 31:11) But that was not possible for many.

Christians as the Gospel was spread further away. Many certainly recalled Christ's words that the place of worship is not as important as worshipping "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:20-24). So where did people go for the Feasts in the New Testament

church? Can they stay at home? Can they meet with their local congregation? Should they go to a central site in their nation or region?

Should they put out their leaven and eat only unleavened bread during the Feast of unleavened Bread? Should they build a tabernacle out of branches at the Feast of Tabernacles? Should they fast on the Day of Atonement? What if their doctor advises against it? Do they have to travel somewhere for Pentecost since it is only a one-day Feast? It was easy to keep the Feast in the nation of Israel when the whole nation kept the Feast, but when Christians live among non-Christians, it can be difficult to keep a job or stay in school if one takes time off to go to the Feasts. Does God expect us to lose our jobs or get bad grades in order to keep the Feasts?

These are all the issues to which Colossians 2:16-17 is referring. The answer Paul gives is "let no man judge you"—they might do different things. Some might make elaborate Feast preparations. Others—especially Christians who are servants (Col 3:22-24)—might have to observe them at home while they continue in their work. The Old Testament penalties for non-feast-keeping are not being carried out. Rather, Christians are being individually judged for all that they do based upon what they know (Luke 12:47-48), and are commanded not to judge their brother:

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether

good or bad (2 Corinthians 5:10).

But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ (Romans 14:10).

Col 2:16 explains that the Feasts are "shadows of things to come"—they prophecy the first and second coming of Christ. He is the reality. One can accept His shed blood for our sins without understanding that he was foreshadowed by Passover lambs for 1500 years (1Cor 5:7). But what Christian would not want to know all the Bible has to teach about Christ's first coming—or His second? Pentecost shows us the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the Church age between the His two comings. The last four Feast Days, in final fall harvest time of the year, are about the second coming of Christ. Do all Christians want to know more about that? Will His second coming be manifested first to those who are keeping His Feast Days, just like the Holy Spirit was first poured out on those believers gathered for Pentecost? (Acts 2:1-8).

While some believers may keep the Feasts because they think they "have to," this writer wants to keep the Feasts because Christ did, the New Testament Church did and they are a joyful time to learn more about our Father's plan for His children! May God bless all of us with a greater understanding of His Word and His Feasts!





THREE LITTLE WORDS

“Forgiveness is the final form of love.” -- Reinhold Niebuhr

“I FORGIVE YOU”. It seems so simple. But is it? In the Church of God community, many have come to expect they will be forgiven no matter what they do to others. And on the other hand, brethren feel the pressure to be forgiving no matter what is done to them. (I am not talking of petty grievances or personality and relationship conflicts as humans tend to have on a regular basis.) I am talking about sin. Christians are expected to be forgiving, so some people become careless in this regard and how they treat others. Aren't we instructed to forgive seven times seventy? For it says in Matthew 18 where instruction is given on relationships with brethren:

“Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”- V21-22

Can I forgive with ease the fact that you (they) slandered me, stole from me, dishonored me and/or betrayed trust and broke God's commandments in the process and that it's no big deal? And if we don't forgive people readily, they remind us of this scripture. But can we with a good conscience, support people in their sin by forgiving them without repentance? We know the end result!

Many of us are confused about this issue. So how do we handle the hurt, the offense, the below-the-belt punches we receive at the hands of others from those we dearly love? Can we or should we say I forgive you and walk away? Is that Biblical? We may get angry, or grieve, or feel sadness at the offense; it's much like a death, a grieving process when someone sins against us. And if we don't forgive the person(s) right

away we may suffer feelings of guilt. We may even feel there is something wrong with us, even though we are the victim. We may feel that we are not pleasing to God because we have not forgiven easily. So, how does God handle offenses (sin) from his earthly children? Adam and Eve disobeyed God's instruction and, therefore, sinned against God. What was God's reaction? Did He say, *“I forgive you, just don't let it happen again?”* No, God booted them out of the Garden. He meant what He had said. Adam and Eve had become an enemy of God. They had sinned. And we must realize there is always a penalty for sin.

The Psalmist makes it very clear when he confesses, *“Against You, You only, have I sinned, And done this evil in Your sight”*— Psalms 51:4. David recognizes his evil doings are an attack on God. He was always concerned about his relationship with God and how his carnal actions (sins) affected God. Is this the way we feel? When others sin against us or we sin against others, in reality, we have sinned against Almighty God. So, we have to ask ourselves who should do the ultimate forgiving? Should we forgive before the offender has repented?

In Ezekiel 16, God describes His relationship with His chosen and beloved nation of Israel. He says

“your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed in water to cleanse you; you were not rubbed with salt nor wrapped in swaddling cloths. No eye pitied you, to do any of these things for you, to have compassion on you; but you were thrown out into the open field, when you yourself were loathed on the day you were born. God made

a covenant with us and says with His help we grew to be beautiful but then we betrayed God. How did He feel about this betrayal? God asks the question:

“Were your acts of harlotry a small matter?” - verse 20.

God answers that question:

“I am filled with fury against you, declares the Sovereign LORD, when you do all these things, acting like a brazen prostitute! I will bring on you the blood vengeance of my wrath and jealous anger.” “...So then, be ashamed and bear your disgrace...” - verses 30,38,52 (NIV)

This was no little matter, for God did not say “I forgive you.” If we read all of Ezekiel 16 we can see that God was more than a little grieved with the sin committed against Him. So sin is not a little thing to be brushed under the table. We have to come to think about sin differently. We are a child of God and we are told plainly *“If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea”* - Matthew 18:6. God feels very strongly about His children. He also feels very strongly about sin. We all need to take this admonition seriously and to treat our brethren with love and concern.

So if we have been hurt badly by person(s) because they have sinned against us, it is a serious matter. We cannot lightly forgive them for they have sinned against almighty God. They need to repent deeply of what they have done before forgiveness can even be considered. From one end of the Bible to the

other, sinners must repent of their deeds before forgiveness becomes an option.

Many brethren read only Matthew 18:21-22

“Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, until seventy times seven.”

We all know we are sinners, that we all fall down on occasion and we realize we should be merciful to our brother and forgive them because it says at the end of that chapter,

“So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if you from your hearts forgive not everyone his brother their trespasses”- verse 35.

Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord doesn't count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit” (Psalm 32:1-2).

But we forget to read Luke 17:3,4

“Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.”

Absolutely, we should forgive if the sin is repented of just like the example of the father who forgave his prodigal son who spent all he had in riotous living and when he realized what he had done he comes back to his father and says: *“Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.”* The son repented of what he had done and his Father gladly forgave him. God our Father has given His children choices to make...and they've been instructed to choose life. God has also given us the tools we need...the Words of Life, the death of our Savior that enables us to be forgiven, access to communication with our Father and the gift of His Holy Spirit. Yet, we still sometimes choose the wrong ways to go about things. I am sure the above Father (as well as our heavenly Father) grieved over his

wayward son and became ecstatic when His son recognized the error of his ways and returned to His Father. But there has to be real fruits of repentance.

What of Reconciliation?

None of us enjoy conflict. And we are always eager and hopeful and want so much to believe these folks who have sinned against us want to make things right. But this is not always the case. People's hearts can be hardened and they don't want to repent. They sometimes mistakenly feel they are doing God's will and refuse to see it any other way. Or they may shift the blame onto you and say you are the offender.

We've heard the argument in our own church community, “you are in the Body of Christ, you are brethren, so why can't you get along? And it's true ... If everything was perfect that would work. We also have to recognize there are tares and wheat in the Body of Christ. Yet, we want so desperately to believe that is not so. On occasion we jump too quickly back into bed with the enemy. I speak from my own experience of reconciling without enough fruits being demonstrated. We want to believe the best. That is not always wise. In the long run, reconciliation without real repentance can turn around and cause real grief in your life. Sometimes you are just setting yourself up for another bout of anguish and stress at a later date. I am sure there may be exceptions to this rule, but, I would be very cautious before I made the same mistake again. Please read the story of Joseph's behavior toward his brothers and how thoroughly he checked them out before he reconciled with them (Genesis 42-45).

I was hurt badly and was struggling with this concept of forgiving. I found myself in this position of what do I do now? How can I put this behind me? And my dear friend and sister in the Church said to shelve it. She said, “You have done everything you can, so now leave it to God.” So in my discussion with God (in my mind's eye) I picked up each of the offenders and put them in a box, put the lid on it and put it on a high shelf. I asked God to put it out of my mind and He could do with the contents of the box whatever he desired, for they were all in His hands. Whenever something hurtful comes to mind...I remind myself they are in the box and God will handle it.

These offenders have become the enemy

whom I am instructed to love, not forgive, so I have changed the three little words from “I FORGIVE YOU” TO “I LOVE YOU”. I will continue to love those who have hurt me and I will continue to pray for them. In this way I am not harbouring bitterness, or anger in my heart. Let's pray with the Psalmist who wrote,

“Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord doesn't count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit” (Psalm 32:1-2).

P.S. The above choices were not easily made but with much tears and talking with our heavenly Father. They were heart-wrenching decisions, but necessary ones. There is nothing easy about ending 30-40-year-long relationships with those we love. To break ties with colleagues, friends, brethren, or even family members is never an easy task, quite the contrary as you probably all well know. Yet, it is a path God inspires us to take and sometimes initiates the change Himself.

I have seen His intervention in the lives of others when He will pluck up and remove them from hurtful, destructive situations and plant them in more fertile soil. Our heavenly Father loves us so much and knows these are hard but necessary choices for our (and their) ultimate good. However, we cannot help but feel the stinging loss, yet, we need faith that God will work it out. He knew of these happenings in advance when He wrote the following:

“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundred-fold, and inherit eternal life” (Matthew 19:29).

Yes, our heavenly Father will fill that gaping emptiness we feel with something far superior to what was lost. You will have loving, genuine, caring people filling your lives with much joy. Remember Julie Andrews' quote in *the Sound of Music*: She says “When God shuts a door, He always opens a window.” And because we have made these hard decisions based on God's Word, we are backed and blessed by Almighty God and like Job, we will be more blessed in the end than in the beginning.



Continued from page 17

Caring: Know What They Need

Every good mother knows she is responsible for the needs of her infant. Infants are not born telling us what they need. A mother has to learn from other mothers, written literature and electronic media or sometimes by trial and error. There is a lot of information about the sounds that babies make and what they mean—but it has been figured out by observant mothers everywhere for millennia. Mothers have to feed their babies, change them, clean them, keep them the right temperature, love them and interact with them so they are not lonely. Most of us can remember an exasperated parent shouting to a crying baby, “What is wrong with you?” And so child-rearing can be most exasperating at times. But the adults are the ones responsible for finding out what is wrong and what needs to be done. They need to draw on friends, books, the Internet, libraries, professionals and other resources to find out what their baby’s needs are. That is not always easy to do at 2 A.M. when some problems occur. But the parent must carry out the responsibility they have accepted when they made or adopted a baby.

When we encounter the children of others, especially if any amount of care is entrusted to us, we must also know what they need. I remember a story of a man who was babysitting one and three-year-old brothers for a friend. The man was pushing the three-year-old in a wagon. The three-year-old steered right in the direction of his little brother. The man assumed that either the three-year-old would steer away or the one-year-old would get out of the way. But alas, the three-year-old was at an irresponsible age, and the one-year-old was at a trusting age, and there was a painful collision. He understands that now, and so do you!

We cannot state every principle of child care and safety here, but we can state that adults need to learn as much as they can about the needs of small children, and to take on responsibility, not to blame the children when something goes wrong. So it is with new believers. We cannot

state every principle of making new disciples here, but the mature believer needs to take responsibility for the new believers they encounter. Sometimes, we tell them to pray and read the Bible and come to us if they have any questions. When they ask we should answer. Yet there are times when we must know what they need and go to them:

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 (Galatians 6:1).

Faith, Peace and Patience

What if I don’t know what they need? That question is frequently asked of those who raise children and those who work with new believers. And there are times when we do not know and our efforts to find out move slowly. Nevertheless, we can be at peace and have faith that our Father will show us the solution in due time, **and we can patiently communicate that faith and peace to them.** Even in the womb, babies absorb hormones from their mother and learn emotional reactions. If mother is happy when father comes home, baby associates that happy feeling with father’s voice. If father comes home and argues, baby feels that, too.

In working with homeless people, this writer has found mothers who are at peace, even though they have lived on the streets or through very difficult situations, and their babies appear to be very much at peace as well. On the other hand, this writer has known well-to-do Christian mothers who are nearly always upset or worried about something, and as one might expect, they have fussy, upset babies. When the Christian mentor does not have the solution for a new believer’s difficulty, he or she can always have faith that God knows. The Christian can be at peace, even when dear friends are suffering or dying.

Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be

abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Philippians 4:11-13).

Teaching

We are our brother’s keeper (Genesis 4:9-11). If our neighbor’s animals go astray, we should bring them back to him (Deuteronomy 22:1). How much more should we help with his children? If a baby is needlessly upset, we can speak calmly to him. If a baby is minimally hurt, we can pick her up and tend to her. If a child has gone somewhere that they should not be, we can escort him out. One of the most useful things any person can do is speak clear English to a child (not baby-talk) and ask her real questions that she will someday be able to answer. They may not be able to answer now, but it shows they are being regarded as a person and helps them talk when they are ready. Unfortunately, some parents imitate the struggling talk of their children, which sets them behind several years in learning to speak clearly.

Not all of our relationship with God is corrective. Sometimes he just gives us good things with no strings attached. (Matthew 7:11; James 1:17)

We can cheerfully tell a child the right thing to do when they do not know what to do or are not doing it. Will we always be obeyed? No. Might we look a little undignified when we are not obeyed? Yes. But that is what God does with us. How does He feel when he gives people His Word, they call themselves by His Name, but they do not obey Him? But think what a benefit it is to the child when his parents teach him not to throw his food on the floor,

and take the food away if he continues to do it, and then every other adult who interacts with him does the same thing. Sure, there are some areas where only parents can effectively deal with children. But everyone who interacts with a child and has her good at heart can help in basic teaching.

These principles fit exactly with new believers. The purpose is not to look like one has authority or to be obeyed, but to patiently teach the right thing. We can explain our understanding of the scriptures, our relationship with Christ, what we do and why. They may not immediately accept all we teach. But they need to hear the truth of the Scriptures from many people. The overall effect will be wonderful. We are just servants in the hands of our Father, who is working in the lives of everyone according to His will.

Consistency

Consistency becomes meaningful when we have multiple similar interactions with the same children. It is utterly vital to effective parenting. Consistency is the means whereby the attitude and actions of a child can be shaped and molded. When a parent is erratic with the rewards and punishments given to a child, the child will be frustrated and prone to erratic behavior. When a parent is consistent with calmly rewarding good and punishing sin, children almost always take on a pleasant disposition.

What about the non-parent? Suppose you see a friend or relative's baby once a week and your normal activity is to take her on a brief walk, held up so she can see over your shoulder. Sometimes she enjoys the walk; sometimes she seems to fuss unnecessarily. You have learned that she does not like to be held lower against you so she cannot see. So when she gets unnecessarily fussy, you tell her not to fuss or you will have to end the walk and take her back. Then if she doesn't listen, you hold her down low where she cannot see and take her back. This kind of procedure, consistently carried out, will work with most children. They may not understand the exact meaning of the words, but the combination of consistent words, consistent action and consistent attitude send a message that they quickly figure out.

Again, new believers are very similar. If they are struggling with some issues, a consistent response from a mentor is very helpful. I remember a mature believer telling a new believer who was struggling with staying up too late that he would help him in his work as much as he wanted between 8 and 12 in the morning. Another man volunteered to help a new believer as long as he did not smoke a cigarette while he was there. If he thought he just had to have a cigarette, the two would pray until the feeling went away. These consistent helps can really change the lives of another.

Grace

Not all of our relationship with God is corrective. Sometimes he just gives us good things with no strings attached (Matthew 7:11; James 1:17). We can do the same thing with little children. Sometimes it is good just to bring them a toy or something else that they like. This says, "I love you and care about you, apart from anything that you may be struggling with." When there is grace given, there is so much more likelihood that a child will listen and do what he is asked.

New believers need the same thing. They need encouragement with no strings attached. They need to be blessed, thanked and encouraged on behalf of the Father. After all, they are seeking the way of righteousness, when they used to be seeking the world's ways. They need to be included in fellowship with mature believers. They need to be helped both spiritually and physically. Sometimes, a Christian's sense of judgment will say, "If I give them this for free without their earning it, it will teach them to be lazy." If something is given on a consistent basis and the person comes to rely on it, that is true. But to give someone a Bible, or a Bible study aid, or to bring them food, or to invite them somewhere when you know they cannot invite you back, that is a good thing. Again, God does these kinds of things for us all the time.

Joy

It is not enough just to take care of the physical needs of a baby. One also has to play with the baby or have fun. This need not cost money. Most little

enjoy little games, clapping their hands to music, listening to adults read, and all sorts of things like that. While it is vital for parents to develop these skills, they are one of the easiest yet most valuable things that others who interact with children can learn. Throughout my life, I have known people who always seemed to have a game, a toy or a funny story for children—of whatever age. I remember seeing the face of children, even babies, "light up" when they came to visit. The Bible has hundreds of verses about joy and happiness. Christ spoke of joy during His sober message before he was about to die (John 15-17). The apostles spoke of joy in the face of suffering (1 Thessalonians 1:6; James 1:2).

We cannot effectively deal with babes in arms or babes in Christ if we do not have a lot of joy in our lives. Who wants to be like us if we are grumpy?

More to Come

If this article has reached you, and you would like to learn more about how to work with the smallest of people, we encourage you to seek out parents who would be glad to show you and let you learn. If you are interested in helping new believers, consider those in your congregation, or nearby congregations. The ministry will usually be willing to work with you. (If you are someone who is overwhelmed by serious sins, it is best that you repent and ask Christ to free you from them before you begin to be a major influence to others).

In the first article of this series, we learned how dealing with children is a vital mission for everyone in the Church. Part two explained how we are always dealing with a moving target, how we must change what we do as they grow. This article dealt with babies and very young children. Future articles will cover elementary age children, pre-teens, teenagers and children who are now on their own.

May our Father in Heaven help us to be a blessing to all whom He has entrusted to us!





By Norman Edwards

Growing with Growing Pains

With two full years of operation, our ministry to homeless people continues to expand, with 27 Guests now living on the Port Austin Bible campus. We have now provided over 7700 bed-nights, 2200 more than our last report. People are referred to us by several government agencies and grant-funded programs. The police have brought people here, and a judge authorized the release of someone from jail if we would take her in. (She was there because of an unusual altercation at home, not welcome back home, but had no other place to live.)

Many of our Guests go to jobs or work-related programs every day. The others come to our daily morning Bible classes, where we show videos and talk about Bible basics and the truth that we are all beings created in God's image, not flukes of evolution. We presently have a family of six, two families of five, a married couple, five single men and four single women. The children range from 9-month-old twin boys, to toddlers and teenagers. Nearly all come from difficult life circumstances: abused or abandoned as children, illness, job loss, spousal abuse, etc. Some are partly the cause of their own problems: one is on the Michigan sex offender registry a few others have had prison or jail time.

Without PABC, most of these families would break up and some or all of their children would be placed in foster care. Governments generally take custody of children if parents are homeless. The shelters in nearby Tuscola and Sanilac counties only take women and children; the fathers would have to go elsewhere. Neither shelter could accept the single-parent family here with a father, 3 daughters and a son. Children under age 17 cannot live anywhere without a parent or guardian. These shelters do not have the empty space right now to take even half the people at PABC. The shelters that are 90 minutes away in Saginaw, Bay City and Port Huron are typically out of space in their family rooms. Older children can only stay with a same-sex parent. These shelters are not good places for children.

Recently, a long-time resident of Port Austin came back here after 20 years away. His father had owned the main fruit and vegetable store, and many people here remember him. He is a college educated man, and quite able to work. He found PABC through a facebook friend, called us and arranged to stay. After he returned, he contacted numerous friends, and was surprised that either they did not know about PABC, or they had a negative impression of it. This Port Austin resident arranged for a section of the weekly Port Austin Village Council meeting to be devoted to PABC's ministry to the homeless. We attended the June 11th meeting, and our ministry was the subject of an hour and forty minutes of discussion. PABC is located outside the Village in the Port Austin Township, but the Township Supervisor was there as well. I explained we are a church ministry, do not accept government funds and help homeless people with the limited resources available to us. Their basic message to us was: "We

are not qualified to do what we are doing and they do not want ex-convicts or sex offenders anywhere near Port Austin." They did not grasp the value that we take parole/probationers only with their officer recommendations, and only people whom we personally feel safe living next to. They said nothing about the seven other sex offenders and numerous ex convicts who live in Port Austin, who did not come via PABC. Several times during the meeting, they asked me if I would end the PABC ministry. When I explained the poor alternatives many of our Guests would have if we closed, they largely took the approach "it is not their problem." They even advised the returning Port Austin resident to leave PABC, but not a one offered their old friend a place to stay. A few days later, some unknown person called Child Protective Services and told them we had children here living without water and power in our buildings. So we received a panicky call from the electric utility and a visit from a Sheriff Sergeant trying to verify the problem. The only outages we have ever had in eight years were when the utilities themselves were down. Newspaper articles and other documentation are available at <http://www.portaustin.net/pabc/controversies/>

We can understand these leaders desire not to have "problems" in their largely resort town. But we hope we can show them that they are better off to work with their problems and provide ways for struggling people to be productive again—not to simply ignore them.

This is why church and state are separate: God cares for people, even when secular leaders may not.



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After they had done this, he said, "Do the same thing again!" And when they were finished, he said, "Now do it a third time!" So they did as he said, and the water ran around the altar and even filled the trench. At the usual time for offering the evening sacrifice, Elijah the prophet walked up to the altar and prayed, "O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob prove today that You are God in Israel and that I am your servant. Prove that I have done all this at your command. O LORD, answer me! Answer me so these people will know that You, O LORD, are God and that You have brought them back to yourself." Immediately the fire of the LORD flashed down from heaven and burned up the young bull, the wood, the stones, and the dust. It even licked up all the water in the trench! And when all the people saw it, they fell face down on the ground and cried out, "The LORD—he is God! Yes, the LORD is God!" (1 Kings 18:30-39).

There were times in his life that even Elijah was discouraged and lost heart due to the blasé spirit of slackness of his time. Yet God assured him even before this great miracle that there were 7,000 other people who were convicted by their belief in the only true God and had not bowed down to the competing pagan deity Baal at any time. There were those who were keeping the first commandment to love the Lord their God and serve Him alone. We need to ask ourselves, "Do I have any other gods in my life? Or do I worship and serve the LORD God alone? Think on these words of David:

Bend down, O LORD, and hear my prayer; answer me, for I need Your help. Protect me, for I am devoted to You. Save me, for I serve You and trust You. You are my God. Be merciful to me, O Lord, for I am calling on You constantly. Give me happiness, O Lord, for I give myself to You. O Lord, You are so good, so ready to forgive, so full of unfailing love for all who ask for help. Listen closely to my prayer, O LORD; hear my urgent cry. I will call to You whenever I'm in

trouble, and You will answer me. No pagan god is like You, O Lord. None can do what You do! All the nations You made will come and bow before You, Lord; they will praise Your holy name. For You are great and perform wonderful deeds. You alone are God" (Psalms 86:1-10).

Keep the First Commandment! Know without a doubt the Good One who is the authority in your life, and love Him with all your heart, soul, and mind.

And God spoke all these words, saying,

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:1-3 ESV).

For the sermon on this topic by Jeff Patton go to www.cogwebcast.com archives.



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