

SEEDS 2

“A Grain of Wheat” Ministries

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The words of the wise are like goads, their collected sayings like firmly embedded nails – given by one shepherd.

ECCLESIASTES 12:11

PREFACE

This is a new collection of recently written articles, most of which have only been available online until now. These writings cover a great variety of subjects. Some of them are of a more practical nature and do not deal with great “revelations” but with some of the more day-to-day concerns of life. The inspiration for these writings has come from our daily interaction with many different believers in a variety of contexts.

We live in very difficult times, spiritually speaking. We are daily confronted with many different ideas and opinions, some of which have their source in the darkness even though they profess to be “light.” Therefore, it is essential for believers to know God for themselves, to read the Bible daily to learn what God is saying to them through it and to seek to be spiritually awake and obedient to him in every aspect of their lives.

It is the hope and prayer of all those involved with this ministry that every reader can extract some spiritual benefit from the contents of this book and draw closer to their Savior as a result of reading it.

May the Lord bless you richly as you have communion with Him.

D.W.D.

The acronym “FLNT” frequently found in this book refers to the translation: *The Father’s Life New Testament*.

1.

ABOVE ALL THINGS

When Jesus walked physically on this earth, He taught his disciples many things. Since His time here was so brief, no doubt all that He taught them was extremely important. He didn’t waste His time just babbling about trivial subjects. When He taught, He was expressing

truths which were essential to His followers – the things which He had received from His Father (Jn 17:8).

With this in mind, let us look at one particular peril about which Jesus warned us. He warned us to beware of the leaven (or yeast) of the scribes and Pharisees.

Now when Jesus said this, He emphasized it in a special way. To Him this was an extremely important message for us to understand. In fact, it was so essential that He put it at the highest level. He established it as one of the most consequential things that He taught.

He said: “Above all things, beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy” (Lk 12:1 FLNT). You see, He emphasized this teaching by saying: “Above all things.” This must be really important! It must be a kind of key to knowing how to obey and follow Jesus. Therefore, we will take some time here and investigate just what Jesus was teaching.

It is possible that many have read this verse repeatedly, but yet not really understood it. Just like Jesus’ disciples who became confused and didn’t grasp what Jesus was saying, we too can easily read and even re-read this passage without really receiving the revelation of what Jesus was trying to convey. However, since Jesus emphasized this teaching so clearly, it must be crucial for us to see what it is that He is teaching us.

To begin, we should understand that this word “hypocrisy” comes to us from the Greek word “HYPOKRITES” which was a person who acted in a Greek play. From this we can understand that, in essence, a hypocrite is an actor. It is someone who is pretending to be something he is not.

How do good actors do their jobs? Basically, they study the person whom they are going to imitate. They might read about that person. They may be able to meet the person face to face. Or, they might be able to watch some video of that person’s life.

While learning about him, they memorize his facial expressions. They study his mannerisms, the way he dresses, and how he acts and reacts in different situations. They learn to imitate the voice and the way of speaking of the one they are copying. They even try to enter into the psyche of the other person so they can think as they do.

Then they take what they have learned and apply it by imitating the person whom they have studied. They begin to act and speak as if they were that person. Those who are really talented at acting can produce a very convincing imitation of that other person.

Now then, how does this apply to our walk with Jesus? What is it about this sort of activity that it is so essential for us to avoid? Why would Jesus so forcefully warn us against this particular practice? Let us examine these questions together.

One source which believers have for how Christians should behave is their "church." From those around them and perhaps from sermons from the pulpit, they learn things about how they should conduct their lives.

Perhaps they learn about how they should behave. Possibly they learn new "Christian" vocabulary. They may notice that other believers don't swear as much. They might learn that drunkenness is bad, lust is not good and lying is against the teachings of the scriptures. These and many other things new believers pick up from their environment and those around them.

Some believers are also studying their Bibles. From the scriptures, especially the New Testament, they read about Jesus. Through their reading, they can extract many truths about His character and personality. They also learn about how He taught us to live, expressing various virtues which Jesus set up as goals which we are expected to attain.

Perhaps they learn about the necessity of forgiving each other. They see that they must be generous with their time and money. They understand the importance of meekness and humility.

They are taught that they will suffer persecution and that they must remain faithful through all kinds of trials and tribulations. Finally, they realize that they must be loving to everyone in all sorts of situations.

Now what many Christians do when they begin to appreciate these virtues and see that God requires them to express them in their lives is to begin to put them into practice. They begin to train themselves to

imitate what they see in the scriptures. They begin to act out what they have understood.

For many, their Christian lives are based on ever more learning. They learn how to worship, learn how to pray, learn how to cast out demons, learn how to study the Bible, learn how to evangelize and many other things.

Some spend their time continually studying the Bible or listening to others who do so, constantly refining their lives to conform to what they see there. They modify their hair styles and their dress. They try to change their speech habits. They try to treat others in a different way than they did before. They even attempt to control their inner selves, i.e. their temper, their desires, and even their thoughts. Perhaps those who have a strong will and, therefore, are “good” at this can produce something that could be thought of as an imitation of Jesus.

Yet for far too many, their inner lives do not correspond to what they pretend to be in front of other Christians. Their actions are not a result of a transformation of their inner selves. Their life is not a spontaneous expression of Jesus’ nature but just an imitation of it. They are not really what they pretend to be. Instead, it is a behavior they have learned and practiced. It is a reproduction or simulation of how they think they should behave. It is just an act.

This unfortunate fact is revealed in their private lives. When they are alone, when no one else is watching, when they are just with their families or close friends, their actions are different. Their character in private doesn’t match their actions in public. This is true for far too many believers.

Furthermore, in times of stress, pain, or difficulty, what is expressed through them is often not the virtues they have been pretending to have in front of others. When extreme situations come along, it is often not the nature of Jesus which they express.

They become irritable, angry, offensive or selfish. They do and say things which hurt others. When the pain of some situation or temptation comes along, it overcomes their ability to control themselves

and act “like a good Christian.” It is then that what is really in their hearts comes out. Often, it is not very pretty.

Many realize that their lives don’t really measure up to God’s standard. So they hide their sins from others and even try to hide them from themselves. Perhaps they excuse themselves for this double life by thinking that everyone else is just the same. After all, they reason, no one is really perfect.

So, even though they have things in their hearts which they don’t like and of which they and God don’t approve, they just put on a good face in front of Christians so they won’t be rejected by them.

This type of Christianity is common. It is what many consider good and even right. In fact, this “acting like a Christian” is an almost universally accepted method among countless believers around the world. What could be more correct than trying to put into practice what we learn in the Bible? What could be better than “biblical” Christianity? Shouldn’t we be trying to imagine what Jesus would do in each situation and then try to practice it?

Why would Jesus so forcefully and clearly warn us against such activity? It is because it is just an imitation, a piece of theater. It is just a human being trying to act like God.

Since this may startle or even offend some readers, let us take some time to investigate this together.

To begin, we must affirm here that Jesus really does expect His followers to express all of His many virtues. The few mentioned previously are only a small example of the innumerable characteristics of His holy life. Yes, He really does expect that our lives will be full of and actually express all His wonderful attributes. We cannot, indeed we must not, ever, simply excuse ourselves from such holiness and purity by imagining that it is not possible.

Unfortunately, many believers, after trying for many years to attain these virtues, have simply given up and changed their theology to excuse themselves from expecting any kind of visible godliness in their lives.

What then is God's plan? How can we attain to what we see in the Bible if it is not to imitate what we have read about? How can we be truly, visibly, actually righteous? What is the way if it is not to study the Bible and try to practice what we read there? How can we avoid being merely an actor on the Christian stage?

THE FATHER'S LIFE

When Jesus came to earth, He was an expression of something very precious – the Father's life. We read: "In him was *the Father's* life and this life was the light of men" (Jn 1:4 FLNT). This word "life" here in Greek is ΖΟË, which is used almost exclusively in the New Testament to refer to the life of God.

Jesus was full of this supernatural life. Although He inherited a human life from Mary his mother, He chose to live by the superior life within Him, the life of His Father, God. He said: "As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father..." (Jn 6:57 KJV).

You see, this was the secret of Jesus' holy life. He "lived by the Father." His countless virtues, His great power, His incredible holiness, His love and service to mankind was a result of the Divine life within Him. Jesus was not imitating His Father. He was not acting. He was just expressing the nature of the life which was inside of Him. He was allowing the life of God to live through Him.

God is holy. He is righteous, just, and good. He is not trying to be this way. It is not the result of any effort on His part. He just *is* this way. The word "righteous" is, in fact, merely the definition of His holy nature. All the virtues we read about in the Bible are really just an expression of the nature of God. Not only this, but since God is by nature completely holy, He cannot even be tempted by sin (Js 1:13). In fact, He abhors it. It has no attraction whatsoever for Him.

What sin really is, is anything which is contrary to the nature of God. It is He who made the universe and everything in it. He is the Supreme Being. He is the Master of all. Since He is the Creator, it is His character which defines what is right and what is wrong.

The “right” things are those which harmonize with who He is. The “wrong” things are anything which are in violation of, or contrary to, His nature.

Sin is what separates man from God. This is because when we practice things which are opposite to who God is, this causes a separation between us and Him. Think about this. If you know someone who is constantly acting in an offensive way, you begin to avoid them. It is unpleasant for you to be around them. They always grate on your nerves by doing or saying things which you don't like.

Therefore, you distance yourself from them to minimize or eliminate the disagreeable result of being near them. In a similar way, sin separates us from God. Furthermore, those living in sin have a tendency to avoid intimacy with God, since their conscience troubles them when they draw near to Him.

As a result of Adam and Eve's rebellion, mankind fell into sin. Their human nature was changed. It became sinful. The fall of Adam and Eve was disastrous, not only for them but also for us, their descendants. This alteration of their nature was profound and irreversible. They, and as a result, we, became sinful. We sin, not because we just slip up once in a while and err, but because it is in our very nature to do so.

Mankind likes to ignore or cover over this fact. Society tries very hard to project a kind of “righteousness” and goodness, sweeping the ugly side of the human nature under the rug by trying to live by a set of rules and putting those who violate them – the “real sinners” – in prison or even killing them. Or, they invent an easier, human kind of righteousness, such as not eating animals or not criticizing people who have certain unusual tendencies.

But the truth is that all of us are sinners. The most ugly, repugnant sin lies in the heart of every man and woman. While much of this putrid expression of sin is kept in check by societal norms, our own consciences, laws, police, etc., it lives in every person.

As mentioned before, the “uglier” kinds of sins are often exposed when we are under extreme pressure. When everything is going well, we are often able to hide our inner impulses from ourselves and others. But

when we find ourselves in situations of unbearable stress, pain, or fear they manifest themselves.

An example of this could be what happened in New Orleans, Louisiana after a recent hurricane. When the public utilities and other supplies were cut off, people found themselves without food and water. Suddenly they were starving and dying of thirst. In this extreme situation, neighbors who had known each other for years began to act in different ways than before.

Instead of greeting others and being friendly, they attacked each other and even killed each other to get what they felt they needed. The sin which was hidden deep in their hearts found its expression under extreme duress.

Now some might excuse this behavior by blaming the circumstances in which it occurred. However, let me be frank with you. Nothing can come out of you which was not already within your heart. Circumstances do not make you what you are, they just expose what you are. They merely strip away the natural inhibitions and societal restraints which hide what we are from ourselves and from others.

The truth is that we are all capable of the most heinous sins. Murder, rape, hate, robbery and every kind of ugliness lives within every human heart. If you do not know this about yourself, it is because you have never been put into an extreme situation where what is inside of you has been exposed.

I am not insisting here that all human beings will sin in the same way, but only stating a truth: all of us are sinners and this sin is most frequently brought to the surface under duress.

Of course, pressure is not the only thing which brings out our sin. We all sin many times a day naturally and without any effort. These sins may not be so obvious or repugnant, but nonetheless, they are activities, words, and actions which violate the nature of our holy God. They are merely the automatic expression of our fallen human nature.

Perhaps we envy someone else. Maybe we wish we had what they have, be it good looks, money, fame, etc. It might be that we tell "little"

lies to avoid punishment or get ahead financially or socially. Sometimes we hate other people who have mistreated us. We lose our temper. We hurt others. Perhaps we drink too much or practice sex outside of the marriage covenant which God ordained as the only condition in which sexual relations are approved by Him.

The list is endless, but such a “list” is merely a recitation of all human activities which violate God’s holy nature.

This tendency to sin, this fallen, ugly nature which we all possess is incurable. That’s right. There is no way to fix it. It is a fatal flaw that has been introduced right into our human life. It is called the “flesh” or the “fallen nature.”

Many Christians today recognize this deficiency. So, they go about trying to correct this sin tendency by training themselves to act like Jesus. They are studying, listening to messages and sermons, going to conferences and retreats – all with the idea that they can teach themselves to behave in a different way. They can learn to act, speak, and even think like a “good Christian.” Much, if not most, of Christian teaching today is involved in this effort to improve or correct the old nature.

Yet, my dear friends, this is what Jesus calls “hypocrisy.” It is merely acting. It is just theater. It is something which He instructed us to avoid. In fact, He said it was to be shunned “above all things.”

Dictionary.com defines “hypocrite” in this way:

From the Greek HYPOKRITES, a stage actor.

a person who pretends to have virtues, moral or religious beliefs, principles, etc., that he or she does not actually possess...

a person who feigns some desirable or publicly approved attitude, especially one whose private life, opinions, or statements belie his or her public statements.

WHAT THEN IS THE ANSWER?

If then, studying the Bible and training ourselves to be better is not the answer, what is? If this fallen nature is incurable, what can we do? How can we fulfill God's requirements and actually become righteous?

The answer is that we must receive a brand new life. We need the life of God. Just as Jesus expressed the Father's righteousness by allowing the Father to live in Him and through Him, we too must be filled with a life that is actually righteous. Our own life does not and, in fact, can never meet this standard.

Here we find some good news! Through the death of Jesus, the way has been opened up for us, mere human beings, to receive the life of God. He has made the Father's holy life available to mankind.

Jesus said: "I have come that they may have *the Father's* life and have it in abundance" (Jn 10:10 FLNT). God has accepted Jesus' sacrifice – His death in our place as an offering – and opened up the way for us to receive His life.

When we believe, repent of our previous way of living and open up our being to Him, the life of God is born inside of us. Some people call this being "born again," yet it is not our old life being born a second time, but the life of Another which is generated by the Holy Spirit in our human spirit. Jesus called it, "being born from above."

Jesus taught us this in John 3:5-7 where we read: "Truly, truly I say to you, unless someone is born through water [the physical birth] and the Spirit [the new spiritual birth], he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born naturally is the physical body, and that which is born of the Spirit is *our human* spirit. Don't be surprised that I said to you, you must be born from above" (FLNT).

How wonderful! We can actually experience the birth of another life in our human spirit. Something entirely new can be generated there. A life "from above," a life which is holy and righteous by nature, can be born into us. Now there is the possibility of living a truly holy life instead of trying to produce an imitation. Now we don't need to try to act like Jesus. Instead, His very own life can live in us and through us. This is an essential part of the gospel message.

This truth is clarified for us in 2 Corinthians 5:17 where we read: “...when anyone is in the Anointed One, there is a new creation *inside of him*. The original {natural} *man* has been superseded {passed by, Gk}, look, a completely new *being* has been generated [the new spiritual man]” (FLNT). Here then is the secret of genuine New Testament Christianity. When we allow the life of God to be our source – when our being is controlled and animated by this new life – then we express its nature.

When this new life lives in us, it naturally and spontaneously expresses its own nature through us. We can actually have a truly holy life by allowing Jesus to live through us. Holiness cannot be attained by the old life and nature, instead it is the natural expression of the life of God.

Yet when this new life is born in us, it is born as all other creatures are born: an infant. Just as Jesus was born in a manger and then grew up, so the life of God does not enter into us already mature. The Bible specifically uses the word “born” to emphasize that it is a very young, immature life in the beginning.

Although all the characteristics and attributes of God are in this new life, it is still born infantile and immature. Just as the seed of a huge tree contains all the life and nature of that tree in a very small, compact form, so the new life of God which is born inside of us contains all that God’s life is.

All true believers receive this new life from God. Yet many, instead of simply focusing upon nurturing this life so that it will grow, begin working on their old life and nature to try to make it better. This error is understandable. Once they have met Jesus and glimpsed the beauty and holiness of His nature, they want to be like Him.

Furthermore, they read in the New Testament that they must become like Him. So, they begin the effort of trying to restrain, retrain, and reform their old life. As we have seen, this effort is doomed to failure. It is nothing which can achieve the goal or please God. It ends up just being hypocrisy.

Even though all true believers have received God’s life, it is not always God’s nature which they express. Very many people who call

themselves Christians, don't have lives which reflect the nature of God. They may have certain religious experiences, such as times of worship or prayer or special times when they felt an "anointing," but their everyday lives seem to be full of themselves and not the Divine.

How can we understand this? Naturally, since this new life within us is immature initially, our old life and nature often seem to prevail. Since our old life is more developed and mature, since we have such long experience of being guided by it, this human life is what frequently expresses itself through us instead of Jesus'. This seems to be especially true in times of temptation or stress.

This explains why so many Christians are not holy. The divine life within them is undeveloped and still immature and, consequently, their natural life is predominant.

THE FIRST ANSWER

What then can we do? There are two sides to the answer to this dilemma. The first is that the new life within us must grow up. It must mature. It must grow to the point that it dominates and predominates within us. In order to grow, all life needs food. This is the key. This new spiritual life must have spiritual food.

Many believers err here. They try to help this spiritual life grow through learning, through accumulating information about God. They study the Bible. They perhaps go to seminary. They read many Christian authors. They attend meetings and seminars. They learn and learn.

But accumulating knowledge and information does nothing to feed the spiritual life. In fact, it can damage it or even kill it! Even the words of the New Testament can be used in a damaging way. We read: "But our competence is from God who also made us qualified dispensers of a new covenant – not of the letter, but of the Spirit – for the letter of *the scriptures* kills but the Spirit imparts *the life of God*" [ZOË] (2 Cor 3:5,6 FLNT).

On the other hand, there is something which does cause this new life to grow. It is called food. This is logical. All life needs nutrition to grow.

There are no exceptions. So what is the spiritual food which will nurture this new life? Jesus explains that we must make Him our food. We must eat His flesh and drink His blood. This is the food which nourishes God's life.

We read: "Jesus then said to them, 'Truly, truly I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you cannot have God's life in yourselves. He who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has *the Father's* eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is the true meat and my blood is the true drink. He who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him' " (Jn 6:53-56).

This spiritual eating and drinking of Jesus is not something physical. It is also not something we do through a religious ritual during a meeting of the church. It is accomplished through intimate communion with Him. When we open our hearts to Him and have times of intimate, spiritual fellowship with Him, we are eating and drinking of Him.

These "meals" can take different forms. We can feed on Jesus in the scriptures. When we open this book, we should not approach it as a source of information. We should not go there to "learn" something. Instead, when we open its pages, we should open our spirit to God to have communion with Him.

In the pages of the Bible, God is revealed. When we open our spirit to Him, He will reveal Himself to us there. As we meditate on what He is revealing of Himself, our spiritual man is nourished. It is good to read and re-read the passages which He is illuminating. We can ruminate on them, "chewing" and re-chewing what He is speaking to us. This is an important form of spiritual eating.

We can also drink of His Spirit. Times of worship are good for this experience. As we open our spirit to His Spirit during times (individual or corporate) of true spiritual worship we can drink deeply of Jesus. The more we can drink, the better.

I'm not talking here about merely emotional experiences of shouting, jiggling, jumping, clapping, etc. What is necessary here is true, intimate

contact with a living God. During these times, we can drink of all that He is.

Times of prayer can also be times of intimate communion with Jesus during which we can eat and drink of Him. Such experiences nourish our spiritual man. They cause it to grow.

Of course, maturity is not achieved overnight. All life requires time to mature. Therefore, we should seek to have daily communion with our Lord so that the precious life which He put within us can arrive at its full capacity. The Father's life within us must grow up so that its holy nature can be expressed.

THE DIVINE LIFE EXPRESSES THE DIVINE NATURE

Here is a wonderful spiritual truth. The divine life always expresses the divine nature. It expresses true righteousness. Since it is in its essence a holy and sinless life, it can do nothing else. It is an inalterable truth that every life always expresses its own nature. God's life never sins. In fact, it is incapable of sinning. It is always holy. Therefore, we desperately need to be full of and dominated by His life.

We read: "That which is begotten of God [i.e. the new spiritual man] does not sin because *it is* his {God's supernatural} seed *that* has come to live in him. In fact, he [the new spiritual man] cannot sin because it is something which is begotten by God *who is perfectly righteous*" (1 Jn 3:9 FLNT).

Now this is really good news! We can receive a sinless life and then allow it to grow up inside of us. We can have the life of the God of the universe controlling all of our living. We can have Him governing our thoughts, feelings, desires, decisions, and actions. Just as Jesus "lived by the Father" so we too can be filled with and live by the Father too. In this way, we will live a life which expresses true holiness of character.

Now this holiness is "not our own" (Philip 3:9). It doesn't originate with ourselves. Instead, it is a gift of God. Nevertheless, it is real. It is seen in and through us. It has a visible expression to others. It is not something which only exists in the thoughts of God.

This is good news, but this good news gets even better. We too can overcome temptation. How is this possible? Our God cannot be tempted by sin. Sin doesn't interest Him. He abhors it. We read: "...for God is incapable of being tempted with evil and he himself tempts no one (Js 1:13 FLNT). Therefore, the more we are filled with and governed by this life, the less we find sin interesting, the less we suffer temptation.

This is truly a victorious life! It is this life which delivers us from self and sin. It is this ZOË life which is saving us from all that we are as natural, fallen human beings. This life, growing up in and living through us is how we are delivered from all that is negative and evil in our nature.

This truth is illustrated for us in Romans 5, verse 10 where we read: "For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more, having been reconciled, we will be being saved by his life *growing up in us*" (FLNT).

Some imagine that after we are "born again" we are going back to Eden. That is to say we will revert to the original state of Adam and Eve before their fall. But this is not the case. We are actually called to something much, much holier and higher than what Adam and Eve had. Yes, they were sinless, but they were not holy. They did not have the same nature as God. They did not have His eternal life, they only had a human, everlasting variety.

We understand this because they fell. They were tempted and succumbed. On the other hand, as we have seen, God cannot be tempted. But Adam and Eve were. The life they had was merely innocent or sinless, but not truly holy and righteous like God. Therefore, it failed the test.

Interestingly, God's life was offered to them in the Garden of Eden in the form of fruit from a tree, the tree of life, but they never ate of it. They never availed themselves of all that God offered them in this tree. Therefore, they didn't resist sin. Later, after they sinned, access to this fruit was denied them by an angel and a flaming sword (Gen 3:24).

THE SECOND ANSWER

We have studied the “first answer” of how to be free from sin, which was to receive and then be filled and animated by the life of God. The second answer is, perhaps, a little less agreeable. However, when we see how evil and polluted our own natural life is, we will understand the necessity of it. The second answer then, is that our own natural soul life must be killed. It must die.

Why is this necessary? It is because as long as the old, natural life lives, it will sin. It will invariably express its own nature. This too is an inalterable principle. Although we may try to subdue its evil tendencies, although we may try very hard to be better and not sin, the true nature of the old life will sooner or later come out.

No amount of reeducation, restraint, retraining, or reform will get to the root of the problem. Such efforts only serve to hide our true nature. They end up being just acting – our own personal theater. This is what Jesus called “hypocrisy.”

The only answer to this problem is the death of the life which sins. We read: “For he that is dead is freed from sin” (Rm 6:7 KJV). As long as the natural soul life is alive it will sin. Only the dead no longer sin.

Perhaps I could tell a story here to illustrate this truth. Many years ago, I had a friend who hunted raccoons to sell their fur and support his family. He hunted them at night with the aid of dogs who would chase them until they ran up a tree where he then found them.

To help him have success, he bought an expensive hunting dog. Yet when he took the dog out at night, it would only chase deer. This was a huge problem for him. Not only did he not get raccoons, he would lose his dog, since it would chase the deer for miles. The next day, he would have to spend a lot of time trying to find this dog.

In his attempts to cure his dog of this tendency, he tried everything. For example, he even put the dog in a sack scented with deer musk and then kicked and beat the sack. Yet, nothing worked. That dog loved to chase deer.

Then one day reading a hunting magazine he came across an advertisement. It read something like this: “Total cure for dogs chasing

deer. Money back guarantee if not satisfied. Price \$12." My friend was doubtful but desperate. He sent off his money and a short time later received a small package in the mail. He eagerly opened the package and found inside two .22 caliber bullets with instructions: "Shoot the dog in the head twice. He'll never chase another deer." In the same way, dead people don't sin anymore.

Some may perhaps be offended with the thought of their needing to die. Yet, we can only be offended if we do not yet see the degenerate side of our human nature. If we have not yet perceived how ugly our sin is and how desperately we need to be saved from it, then we might be resistant to the idea of dying.

However, when by the mercy of God and through His enlightening us, we see how evil our tendencies are, then being free of them through death becomes a delight. We will actually rejoice to know that we can be delivered from what we are and what we do.

This wonderful deliverance also comes to us through Jesus Christ. When He died on the cross, in some supernatural way, we too died with Him. Through the Holy Spirit, this death can become real to us today. It can be applied to our old life with its fallen nature. We, through Jesus, can actually experience a real death to ourselves. We can and, in fact, should experience this every day.

Of course, God doesn't bless us with this experience unless we are willing. He would never force this upon us. Unless and until we see our sinfulness and hate what we see, we will continue to have it. We cannot be delivered from it. But once we see our sin in the light of God and repent, then our Lord will begin to actually apply His death on the cross to our old man.

After this liberating death comes resurrection. Not only can we experience the death of Jesus, we can experience His resurrection too. In fact this is a necessity. In order to walk "...in *the newness of the Father's life*" (Rm 6:4) we must first pass through death.

No living person has ever been resurrected. Only the dead have the possibility of having this experience. Therefore, the more we allow God to apply the death of Jesus to our old life and nature, the more we will

experience of His new life and nature in resurrection. What a blessed deliverance!

We have already mentioned that repentance is part of this process. How then does this work? We read in 1 John 1:9, “When we agree *with God’s judgment* concerning our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all immorality of character [of both heart and actions]” (FLNT).

To “agree with God’s judgment,” is translated in many Bible versions “confess.” The Greek word means “to speak together.” This means that we are speaking the same thing as God is speaking. We are agreeing with His viewpoint concerning our sin and His judgment upon it.

We are agreeing that our old nature is evil and that people (specifically us) who practice sinful things are worthy of death. This is what it means to repent. Anything less than this is just an admission of guilt but not a willingness to die to what we have done and what we are.

When we repent or “agree with God” about our sinful actions, we read that He is then faithful and just to do two things. First, He will forgive us. Then He will work in our lives, applying the death and resurrection of Christ, to cleanse us from these things.

What a wonderful salvation Jesus has provided for us so that we can be free from sin. Not only can we be forgiven, but through the operation of the cross in our lives and the resurrection which comes afterward, we can be delivered from our sinful life and nature. Hallelujah!

ABOVE ALL THINGS, BEWARE

With this foundational understanding of what God’s true plan is, we can now go on to discuss the problem of yeast or “leaven.” It should become apparent from our study why Jesus is so concerned that we avoid this leaven, this hypocritical imitation of Himself, “above all things.”

The last thing God would want from us is an imitation, something our flesh could produce, trying to act and speak like Him. He is looking for something genuine, something that is real in our lives. His plan is to

actually change us into His image. He has no interest in our pretending to be something we are really not.

Someday we will stand before Him. Everything we have done, said and thought as well as everything we are will be revealed. All will be brought into the light. If there is anything in us which is not real, if there is any pretense, anything false, anything which is just an act on our part, it will stand out with the utmost clarity to our shame. Jesus explains this in His teaching about leaven. We read: "For there is nothing covered up that will not be exposed, or hidden that will not be revealed" (Lk 12:2 FLNT). It's all going to come out. It's all going to be exposed before the watching universe.

Therefore, you don't want to be caught living something which is really just a lie. You don't want to be found with a life which has been merely theater and not the real thing. Our Christianity must be an expression of Christ and not an imitation of Christ.

This genuine expression can only be obtained through a life of total submission to Jesus. It is gained by Him working in our lives to transform us into His glorious image. It is through His grace that He is filling us with His holy life and applying His death and resurrection to our old, natural man with its sinful nature.

On the other hand, any imitation of this reality is done by the flesh. It is just the efforts of the human being to change itself. It is fueled by a desire to appear better than we are in front of others and energized by a strong will with which we try to control ourselves and act better than we really are inside.

CHRISTIAN MEETINGS

Such hypocrisy is even common in Christian meetings. Far too often, such meetings are just theater. People dress up, putting on their best clothes so that they will look good in front of others. They also put on their best faces, so that others won't see their sorrow, suffering or sin.

Many times these meetings are also full of showmanship of various kinds. There might be a band playing with spotlights and other decorations. There is, almost inevitably, a stage of some sort.

Although most of those in the audience may be singing along, it is sad but true that not all are really worshipping. Even the music may be merely soulful and not something inspired by God or led by the Holy Spirit. This then is just acting. It's just a show.

Sometimes there are dance teams with costumes and flags or streamers. Other groups have mime teams and even clowns. Such times may provide more entertainment than genuine ministry of Jesus Christ. If all this is not truly an expression of Jesus' life inside of us, it is just hypocrisy.

Furthermore, today's preaching is frequently theater. The preacher may have on his special, expensive suit. The oratory might become quite an act, with the preacher using voice modulation, gestures, and other devices to capture and hold the attention of the audience. All of this can appear quite holy, but in some cases, even those preaching are not right with God and have secret sins in their lives.

Jesus often preached sitting down, in a boat or on a rock. He used no theatrical techniques to attract and hold audiences. He humbly ministered what He had received from the Father to others. He never sought fame or fortune. He never acted like He was something special, even though He really was. How does this compare with what we are doing today?

If our meetings together are not an expression of the life of God, it is merely acting. If we are not entering into the Holy Spirit, if we are not truly having communion with God, it is just a human substitute for what the Lord is really after. Such meetings do little or nothing to genuinely minister to those in the congregation.

Not only can meetings which are merely theater not edify anyone, they can actually serve to limit true spiritual progress. Through such hypocritical displays of "Christianity" many are deceived into thinking that they are right with God.

They are going through the motions. They are doing what is expected of them – what everyone else is doing. They are being taught, both through the teaching and by example, that this is what God expects of them too.

However, God can never be satisfied with a substitute. He doesn't care for our acting. He is looking for those who will worship Him in Spirit and in truth (Jn 4:24). This word "truth" means that what we are doing is genuine. It is real. It is the result of a real transformation of our inner being. It is His life which is being expressed and not a substitute.

THE TEACHING OF THE PHARISEES

Jesus' warning about leaven or yeast is also found in Matthew. We have examined the Luke passage, but in Matthew we find a little more light.

We read: "And Jesus said to them, 'Be on your guard and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.' So they reasoned among themselves saying, 'We didn't bring any bread' ... 'How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? But beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.' Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the yeast of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Mt 16:6,7,11,12 FLNT).

Here we see that this yeast, this corrupting element, can also be some kind of "teaching." What then does this mean? It is clear that Jesus labeled the Pharisees and Sadducees "hypocrites." Theirs was a life of theater. They worked constantly, perfecting their acting skills to appear righteous to others.

Jesus says: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, *you* hypocrites. For you carefully tithe from the mint, dill, and cumin *you receive*, but you have ignored the more essential matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faith. These you should have practiced while not neglecting the others. You blind guides. You strain out the gnat and swallow the camel.

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, *you* hypocrites For you clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are full of *greedy* grasping for money and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisees, clean up first the inside of the cup and the dish so that the outside may become clean also.

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, *you* hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which outwardly appear beautiful, but inwardly are full of dead men's bones and of all kinds of uncleanness. In the

same way, you also appear *superficially* righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and sin" (Mt 23:23-28 FLNT).

Not only were the scribes and Pharisees acting in their own personal theaters where the world around them was the audience, they were teaching others to act this way too. They were passing on to others the secrets of deceiving others to think that they were righteous, when in fact, they were not.

They were "ministering" a whole set of rules and regulations to follow. They were teaching people to follow the law. They were establishing principles by which they should live their lives so that they too could appear righteous.

Does this sound like something which is happening in the church today? How much of today's Christianity is involved in just such activity? So many are teaching others how to behave. They teach principles, rules and norms which they think they and others should follow.

This might involve dress codes, whether or not a Christian should be participating in certain sports, if birth control is allowed by God, how to behave in your marriage and your family, how church meetings should be conducted, and many, many other such things.

Now, let's be honest. Many of the things these people teach are right and good. They have a biblical basis. They are actions defined by God and revealed in the scriptures as being in line with His holy nature. So then, what is wrong with this?

Why then does Jesus so forcefully condemn it? What could be wrong with such biblical things?

Jesus condemns it because these teachers are encouraging others to attain these high standards through the efforts of the flesh. They are teaching others to act in ways which imitate God, but not helping them really enter into God to become free from themselves.

So much of what is taught today fits into this category. It is merely instructing us how to reform the old nature to make it look better. This

is merely acting. It is not something which can please God. Furthermore, it is not eternal. It won't stand the test on judgment day.

Such instruction is appealing to the flesh. Not only does it generate an appearance of godliness which we hope others will admire, but it also avoids the cross. It avoids death. Our flesh is very sneaky. It would much rather deny itself some little pleasures than die. It would much prefer conforming itself to some religious patterns, even if they require a little self-sacrifice, than to actually cease to exist.

Many do not realize that the flesh can be very religious. But think about it. There are many, many religions in this world. Most of them teach some form of self-denial, some of them a very severe self-denial. In fact, the really dedicated followers of some of these religions are much, much more severe in their self-denial than many Christians.

But these other religions do nothing to actually transform us into the image of Jesus. Neither does a Christianity which is based on following rules, regulations and norms. You see, the flesh of man can be very religious and even convincingly religious. But this is not a genuine expression of Christ. It is not what our God is seeking. This is why many Christians' lives are mere theater and do not reflect what is really going on inside of them.

God's plan is to give us His life. Then He wants this life to grow up inside of us. The more it matures, the more we express His nature. This is not a result of self-effort. It is not an imitation of anything. It does not require "training" and teaching about how to behave. Instead, it is an automatic and spontaneous expression of Jesus Christ.

Our righteousness cannot be something which we do or even can do. Paul condemns the Jews for this kind of activity. He writes: "For I testify concerning them that they have a zeal for God, but not according to a complete understanding. For being ignorant of God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own righteousness, they do not submit themselves to the righteousness of God" (Rm 10:2,3 FLNT).

The "righteousness of God" is just that. It is His and His alone. It is when He is living in us and when He is expressing Himself through us, that we exhibit a true righteousness which pleases Him. Anything other

than this is just hypocrisy. It is something to be avoided “above all things.”

2.

RAISING CHILDREN

When God gives us children, we take on an awesome responsibility. For reasons of His own, God entrusts these precious lives into our care. When this happens, we become responsible before Him for how we carry out this responsibility. Therefore, as parents we should carefully and prayerfully seek to fulfill this task in the best possible way. We must raise our children following the guidance and wisdom of the Lord.

Perhaps the first thing we should acknowledge is that since God made human beings, He is the One who knows best how to deal with every situation. The Maker of the product always knows best how to care for what He has made. We must not rely on our own wisdom, ideas and opinions. Also, we cannot be guided by the standards of the world around us or those of our relatives and friends. We must be led by God in this all-important task.

LOVE

One of the most important ingredients we must have in raising children is love. These new, tiny, precious human beings need love – lots and lots of love. The more, the better. In their first years, the most essential things they must have (besides food of course) is love, care, and nurturing. Nothing can substitute for this love.

A loved infant will become a well-adjusted adult. A loved baby will become someone who is secure, someone who also knows how to love, and someone who feels comfortable loving others and receiving love themselves.

The absolute best and most essential source of this love is the baby's parents. No one else will ever love an infant like its own father and mother. There is just no substitute for this love. You cannot hire anyone who will love your children in the same way that you would love them. And this love takes much time, focus, and attention.

Before having children, perhaps it would be good for couples to stop and ask themselves a few questions. Are they really ready for this? Are they willing to make the commitment of time and attention that having a child will require? Are they willing to make this new life a priority or are there other things which are commanding their attention? When you have children, are you just thinking of yourselves and your own desires for children, or are you also taking into account the well-being of the tiny life which God will entrust to your care?

Many couples think that their making money and having a "successful" life will be the best for their children. They want to "provide for the child" by piling up money for their children's future, be it for schooling, housing, inheritances, etc. Yet, are these folks really thinking about the child or about themselves and using the child as a pretext to pursue what they want?

Very many parents, using "making money for their children" as an excuse, absent themselves from the home and from the lives of their babies in the pursuit of money.

Yet, young children don't need money. They need love and care. They need nurturing, time, and attention. They need their parents to be with them. They need to feel secure in the arms of their mother and father. As long as they have enough to eat, "money" is not an issue with them.

You cannot hire others to love your children for you. Nothing you can buy can compensate for your absence from your home and the lives of your young infants. Nannies, babysitters, grandparents, or other relatives cannot fill this void. Their efforts can never equal that of a parent. What your children need, especially in their first formative years, is you and your constant attention, care, and love.

Parents have a few short years to instill within their children a profound sense of security: of being loved and cared for. Nothing can ever

substitute for this. No amount of money, later education, physical comfort, or inheritance can ever compensate for the lack of love in the early formative years of a child.

Please don't make providing for your children's future your highest priority. Provide for their present need for love! Stay home and love them today! The future is in God's hands and He will take care of it for you as you obey Him in raising your children.

If you sacrifice your children's present emotional needs by "trying to make their future secure" you will create future problems that nothing but the miraculous hand of God will resolve. No future financial "security" can ever compensate for a lack of abundant, paternal love today.

How many of today's youth are desperately seeking to fill their lives with something, be it drugs, sex, attention from others, or any number of other vain pursuits, because they don't feel loved and secure. They were not raised in a home which abounded with love and so they constantly seek to compensate for this lack.

In many cases, they don't even realize what it is that they are seeking for, but they only sense a desperate need for something that they don't have. They have a constant, undefined "itch" which they are seeking to scratch.

Many of those I have met who call themselves "homosexuals" grew up in love-deficient homes. Many men of this persuasion did not feel loved by their fathers. Their fathers were distant and unaffectionate. But every young boy needs a father's love. In fact, he craves it.

Not a few "macho men" think that by hugging, kissing, and loving their sons, it will turn them into wimps, etc. But exactly the opposite is true. A loved son will turn out to be a self-secure, masculine man. Some who are not loved will later seek this love from other men.

The same is true for women. I know a woman, for example, whose mother never once picked her up or held her in a warm, loving embrace. This person had a very difficult time trusting in or receiving love, yet she craved love like nothing else.

But because of her complicated emotional distrust, she had enormous problems receiving love when it was given. The lack of love in infancy generates tremendous emotional problems and complications in the lives of such people in later life.

As with men, so too with women who feel the lack of a mother's love in early life, some may be impelled to fill such lack with relationships with other women. The human need for love is strong. It is an extremely powerful factor which works, even if unconsciously, in the lives of every human being on this planet. Much of human behavior can be explained by what people do to try to satisfy this natural, normal need. Those who are raised in a warm, loving home will be much more welladjusted members of society.

What our children need is our love. If, for some reason, we find ourselves without love, then we need to turn to God for His supply. And He has an unlimited supply. In fact, He is Love (1 Jn 4:8). Perhaps we find our children irritating and difficult, possibly we have physical suffering, maybe our marriage is not satisfactory... there are many things which might challenge our love supply for our children. Yet God is sufficient for all these things. He can and will give us an unlimited love for the young lives which He puts in our care.

DISCIPLINE

Another important aspect of raising children is discipline. Our children must be disciplined in a correct, biblical way. If they are not, then they and we will suffer the consequences.

Every human being, to a greater or lesser degree, has born within them the tendency to rebel. This might be called "independence," selfwill, stubbornness, being strong-willed, or any number of other things. But no matter what we call it, it is the tendency to disobey. This must be corrected if our children are to grow up to be welladjusted, mature adults.

According to God – who made man – the thing which corrects this problem is called pain, pain caused by discipline. This pain, according to the scriptures is created by the parents upon the offending child through the use of something called a "rod." It may seem archaic for

many parents to think that pain is the thing which will achieve the necessary results, but, according to the Maker, it is what works. In fact, it is the only thing that works to correct rebellion.

In Proverbs 20:30 we read: “Blows and wounds cleanse away evil, and beatings purge the inmost being” (NIV). Here is what God says. This is what “works.” Although it may sound cruel or crude, it is what our Maker teaches us about the creature He made.

This is not a hard concept to understand. Pain, rightly applied, corrects rebellion. Although many may rebel against this thought, it is the only thing which works. All other human substitutes will only hide or aggravate the problem.

Reasoning will not touch rebellion. Small punishments such as deprivation of watching TV or not getting to do something fun will not reach deeply enough inside the child to work. It won't reach their heart. Also, creative thinking of ways to distract the child or finding other things for them to do will just prolong or hide the problem of rebellion.

Obviously, there are many times when a child is doing something potentially dangerous, irritating, inappropriate, foolish, or wrong when we can direct or redirect them to avoid potential trouble. There are many situations where they are not expressing rebellion and, therefore, do not need discipline. Every little thing in a child's daily life does not warrant discipline. But when rebellion is present, only the rod of pain will work.

You may think that you know better than God, but you don't. You may imagine that reasoning with the child, prayer for them, little “time outs,” other less severe corrections, various restrictions placed upon them, etc. will correct the problem. Although these things certainly do have their place and are important, only the application of the rod, causing pain, will drive rebellion from the heart of a child.

Maybe for some of you readers it is difficult to imagine that something so crude as physical pain could be the answer to so many human problems. But it is! God says so in His book. We read: “Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; the rod of correction will drive it far from him” (Pr 22:15 NKJV). We are also taught: “Blows that hurt cleanse

away evil, as do stripes [from beating with a rod or whip] the inner depths of the heart" (Pr 20:30 NKJV). This is how God made man. This is what "works." Don't be deceived into thinking that you know better than He does.

However, this rod which causes pain must be applied correctly. If not, then it will not help and possibly only make things worse. Therefore, I would like to take some time here and discuss several aspects of how parents should apply this rod.

Firstly and perhaps most importantly, this application of the rod must hurt. It must be applied until the rebellion for which it is being used is broken. This "breaking" of the willful rebellion of the child will usually be noticed in the way they cry.

If our using of the rod does not cause enough pain or does not continue until the rebellion is broken, it will only make the child harder. They will learn that they can "survive" this discipline and it will not work. This kind of "discipline" only hardens the heart of the child and is worse than useless.

Often, parents want to avoid pain. Unfortunately, the pain they want to avoid is usually their own. It is hard and even painful to them to cause their children pain. So they don't use the rod to cause pain or don't use it effectively. Thus they spare themselves and their children pain for the moment and store up for themselves and their children a huge storehouse of pain when they become older and this untreated rebellion begins to come to full bloom.

If you would like to have peace, less emotional pain, and a good relationship with your children when they grow up, then apply the rod of correction when they are young. God teaches us: "Correct your son, and he will give you rest; yes, he will give delight to your soul" (Pr 29:17 NKJV).

We also read: "The rod and rebuke give wisdom, but a child left *to himself* brings shame to his mother" (Pr 29:15 NKJV). How many parents are suffering today because they did not discipline their children! They thought they were avoiding pain for themselves and

their child by not correctly using the rod, but instead they were just storing much more painful situations in the future.

Many may imagine that causing their child pain is a form of hate or lack of love. Yet just the opposite is true. When we do not discipline we are doing our child the greatest disservice.

We are taught: "He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him promptly (Pr 13:24 NKJV). This "hate" is because when we don't discipline them correctly, according to the scriptures, we are setting our children up for unimaginable suffering in the future. This "hate" is a lack of love for the child. It is love of "self" on the part of the parents.

Parents have just a few years to treat the rebellion in their children. Until about the age of six a child's character can be molded. Even many psychologists agree that a person's character is well-defined and formed by that age. After that, discipline will not change their character very much.

Through the years I have seen many, many families with disobedient children who were not correctly disciplined. In many cases, after the age of six, this rebellious attitude seems to disappear, especially with young girls. The parents breathed a sigh of relief. Finally those "difficult days" were over. But they weren't. Instead, when these children became teenagers, rebellion blossomed with full force.

This flowering of rebellion which is left untreated usually comes in the teenage years and will manifest itself in many, many different ways. These ways include, but are not limited to: unholy sexual activities with boyfriends, girlfriends etc., involvement in drugs, mental illness, disrespect for authority (especially yours), lack of integrity, etc. All this will yield the fruit of years of horrible mental anguish and emotional pain for everyone involved, especially the parents.

I have seen children "raised in Christian homes" who, after they became teens, became addicted to drugs, became pregnant outside of marriage, became sexually promiscuous, were been sent to prison, and many other such things. These were children who were never correctly disciplined.

The application of the rod of pain should be applied to the backside of the child. If this discipline is very frequent, then it is being done incorrectly. When well applied, this discipline should not need to be done more than about 10 to 15 times in the life of a child. Of course, this "10 to 15" is a random number, but the truth behind it remains the same.

If we are disciplining frequently, if we are applying the rod much more than this, then what we are doing is not being done correctly. If we apply the rod correctly, then just the mention of discipline should bring the required results in later circumstances.

Applying the rod must be done with enough force and for enough time to break the rebellion which the parent is treating. This needs to be emphasized! Anything less than this will not do the job. If we stop short of this, we will only make the poor child worse. Discipline which breaks the rebellious attitude brings respect for the parent and his or her authority and a healthy "fear" of stepping out of line again.

The rod should be applied because of rebellion. This must not be a punishment for clumsiness, accidents, lack of intelligence, ignorance, trivial errors and other such minor offenses. In general, the rod must be used when the parents detect rebellion in the child. This could be catching the child lying, disobeying what they have been told, or even attitudes such as temper tantrums.

A good, well-applied spanking on the bottom will cure the child of such behavior. It will put an end to it. There is no need for parents to suffer with such rebellion on the part of their children. It is sad but true. The human being learns well through pain. If the attitudes of rebellion and disobedience continue, then the discipline has not been adequately applied.

Some Bible teachers insist that you should not discipline your child when you are angry. I beg to disagree. Of course we should not have an uncontrolled rage so that our discipline passes the needed point and becomes abuse.

Yet, if you let your anger pass, you may never carry out the needed discipline. Or, you may not have the necessary impetus to inflict the

required pain to break the rebellious attitude of the child. All anger is not wrong, but all anger must be under the control of the Holy Spirit.

Someone has even suggested that if we don't discipline our children, our anger will build up and result in disaffection for them. Having children who are constantly acting badly is irritating and tiresome. When our children constantly cause us difficulty we tend to withdraw emotionally.

If we don't correct them, we run the risk of alienating ourselves from them through the accumulation of unexpressed anger and frustration. As time goes on, we can become distant and unresponsive to them because we do not discipline them. This is not love.

On the other hand, disciplining your children with the rod is an act of love. Proper discipline is one of the most loving things you can do for your child.

Although it may not seem to be loving at the moment, it is. In fact, it is an act of self-sacrifice on the part of the parent. They are denying themselves by not taking the easy way out and avoiding emotional pain. They are applying the rod with the best interests of their child in mind. They are truly doing what is the best for the child, not leaving him to grow up without discipline which will cause him or her much difficulty in later life.

After we discipline our child and their rebellion is broken, it is good to hold them and love them. Once the willfulness and stubbornness is broken then we should hold them tightly and show them our tenderest love.

This is a wonderful sign to them that they have done the right thing in submitting to correction. It is proof to them that we have disciplined them out of love and not hate. It shows them that our inflicting pain was necessary for them and our feelings for them are in no way diminished.

Disciplining children is not the same thing as physical beatings. I know of a man whose father beat him frequently. When this father came home from work frustrated or angry, he would find an excuse to begin

beating his son with his fists or any other thing which he found at hand. He used his son as a punching bag to vent his frustrations. At one point, he even broke his son's jaw.

This is not discipline. This is not what the Bible is teaching us. It is just plain, physical abuse. Discipline is not the same thing as punishment. One definition of "discipline" is: "to train, drill, teach, school, coach; regiment." A definition of "punishment" which I found is: "a battering, a thrashing, a beating, a drubbing." These are not the same thing.

The goal of discipline is to break the rebellious attitudes which manifest themselves in our children. It is not to punish them. The duration of the discipline should not be related to "how bad" the rebellion was. Discipline should be applied only until the rebellion is broken and not continue beyond this point. If we go beyond the moment where the child's rebellion is broken, we run the risk of alienating them.

In true discipline the skin should not be broken. There should be no blood. Discipline is for the good of the children. It is not the opportunity for the parent to vent their frustrations or anger on the child. Some parents beat their children unmercifully for small infractions, wounding them unnecessarily. This is merely abuse. It is evidence that the parents themselves have emotional issues which need treating.

SAYING "NO"

Parents should be very careful with the word "no." If and when they say it, they must mean it. It must be about something important. Furthermore, defiance or rebellion against it must bring discipline. Our "no" must mean "no." Therefore, we must be very careful and wise when saying "no."

Many parents say "no" about every little thing. They are constantly saying or even screaming "no" at their children. This does not help them and only teaches them to ignore your words. If your "no" is not enforced it becomes meaningless.

Therefore, when we say "no" it must be about something consequential enough to warrant our involvement and the eventual discipline which

must be applied if our word is not obeyed. If we are not prepared to carry our word through to the end, including the discipline which may be required if our child does not obey, then it is better not to say it. When we just say “no” and then let the child do what they want anyway, this is worse than useless. It is teaching the child that “no” means nothing, or even “yes.”

An extreme example of the terrible results of such training would be when your son, after he grows up, is forcing himself on or even raping a young woman. She is screaming “no” but he pays no attention or even hears “yes.” Who taught him such behavior? You did, through your erratic, thoughtless use of the word “no”!

“No” without the corresponding discipline when your word is disobeyed generates rebellion and complete lack of discipline.

Although, after the first five or six years of life, your children may appear to become more obedient, when they become teenagers, this rebellion will reappear with force. At that time, there will be no effective way to deal with it. You will just have to live with the consequences you have created.

When you say “no” it is often good to explain to the child *why* you are saying “no.” You might say: “Don’t touch that stove because it is hot and will burn you.” You might teach them: “Don’t walk in the street without looking carefully because you might be hit by a car.”

Even very young children can understand explanations. They can reason a little bit. So, a thoughtful explanation helps them understand why you are prohibiting something. If you can’t think of a good explanation perhaps you should not be saying “no.”

Another situation which one encounters frequently is that some (especially mothers), because of their own fears and insecurities, say “no” to almost everything their child wants to do. They “protect” them too much and from everything. They create an impracticable world for the child to live in where they can do almost nothing.

Later on, this will become impossible for the parent to enforce and can lead to children who are not well-adjusted mentally. They become

neurotic, becoming full of fears or impulsivity. They may do things suddenly without thinking or cower in fear of seemingly normal situations because of so many previous restrictions.

Discipline is not the same thing as domination. Some parents dominate their children, trying to control every aspect of their lives. This domineering, overbearing, controlling practice will generate rebellion in the hearts of your children. Such activity is not “forming their character,” it is deforming it. It is trying to conform your child to an image you have in your own mind. It is manipulative and harmful to the child.

God doesn't want you to conform your child to your image but to His image. He created each person, including children, to contain and express Himself. As part of this plan, He gave each person freedom to choose and freedom to be what He made them to be.

As parents, we too must responsibly give our children freedom to develop into who they are, into the person God made them to be. Don't try to manipulate your children to be like yourself. Don't dominate them as a means of trying to control them. Instead, let them be free but discipline them when rebellion is present.

SELF-DISCIPLINE

Correct discipline of a child, including the use of the rod of pain, creates self-discipline. This works in the following way. When rebellion on the part of the child results in painful discipline which breaks the willful rebellion, then the child will think twice before rebelling again.

Due to the dislike for the pain and the fear of experiencing it again, the child learns to control himself. They may think about doing something wrong, or be tempted to do it, but the memory of pain inhibits them. In this way, they learn to discipline themselves. They become self-disciplined people.

Children who are not disciplined usually have no self-discipline. They have never learned how to say “no” to themselves. If they want to do something or feel like doing it, they just go ahead and do it. They have

no fear of the consequences and no experience in restraining themselves.

These people without the ability to control themselves and without the experience of doing so become totally self-centered and self-interested. They do whatever they feel like doing without regard to others around them or the consequences of such actions for themselves and others.

I recently heard of a man who was an example of this problem. He was happily married. He loved his wife. But he “fell in love” with another woman too. He didn’t want to leave his wife, but he felt he needed to indulge all of his impulses and have both of them because he “loved” both of them. Since he was never disciplined, he had no experience in denying himself anything. He felt he must carry out what his desires led him to do. He had no regard for the consequences on the life of his wife or family. He felt that his natural, unrestrained impulses needed to be followed and gratified since that “was what he felt.”

Our world today is full of people who do not have self-control. They are without discipline. This results in a dysfunctional society of selfish, self-centered, self-indulgent people who have very little, if any regard for the others around them. Such people are constantly trampling on others without regard to their feelings, time, needs, personal space, privacy, etc.

How many young people today are on drugs, in prison, homeless, drunken, divorced and many other such things because they were not properly disciplined! Therefore, they just followed their unrestrained lusts and ended up in a pit of their own making. They stole from others. They used others for their own benefit and pleasure without regard to how this impacted them. They indulged their lusts without regard for other people. They did not control their own impulses.

Therefore, they are reaping the fruit of their lack of discipline. There is no doubt that parents bear a large part of the responsibility for where their children end up.

Is it possible that, while disciplining our children we might err? Could it be that we will make mistakes by yelling at them angrily, applying

discipline erroneously, or other such things? Without a doubt, this will happen. None of us is perfect.

Therefore, we must not be afraid to apologize to our children. It is not wrong to admit our mistakes. It is much better for them if we admit being wrong if we have erred and ask for their forgiveness. This will train them to be able to humble themselves and ask for forgiveness later in life when they err and need to be forgiven by others also.

NURTURE AND ADMONITION

In Ephesians 6:4 we read: “And you fathers, don’t provoke your children to anger but nurture them in the discipline and counsel of the Lord” (FLNT). Here we find that besides discipline, children need nurture and counsel. They also need training. We are told: “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it” (Pr 22:6 NKJV).

The nurturing part of raising children no doubt has to do with the loving care and attention about which we have spoken already. This is the most important basis to establish in the lives of our children. They must know at the deepest level that they are loved. Any discipline and/or training without this most necessary basis of love will not be very effective.

Of course every child needs training in the basic aspects of life: They need to know how to keep themselves clean. They must be taught how to act and behave in our specific society. This may include, but is not limited to: being taught how to respect older people, how to be polite to others, and what kind of behavior is acceptable in our particular social context. They must be instructed about which things in our world are dangerous and should be avoided and/or handled carefully, such as hot stoves, electrical outlets, crossing the street, noisy, angry mobs, etc.

Possibly where we live has special dangers such as poisonous snakes or plants, dangerous people, places which have wild animals, and other things which the adults have learned over time and need to pass on to their children. Obviously, there are many such things which children need to be taught.

But how about spiritual things? How can we train our children in the ways of the Lord? Should we have daily Bible studies and family prayers? Must we take them to “Sunday School” every Sunday?

The most important ingredient here is our own lives. Our children must see us living out Jesus Christ in an authentic, visible way. No one else can ever substitute for this. If we love Jesus and are following Him, this will be obvious to our children. If they see His reality in our lives, it will be attractive to them.

Children are good observers. They see everything which goes on in the home. If the parents are loving with each other, if they treat each other and others with respect, if they have the presence of the Lord with them and around them, children will notice this and desire it for themselves.

But if we are crabby, unloving, unforgiving, self-centered, obnoxious people, it doesn't matter what we say about God to them. If we quarrel with our spouse, are rude with others, impatient, dishonest, complaining, and disagreeable people, then what we say to our children about Jesus or the Bible is nullified.

In such cases, family Bible studies, taking them to “Sunday School” or “church services” is not going to compensate for our deficiencies. Religious activity will not speak louder than what they see in our lives.

If it is not working for us, why should our children want it? If our Christianity is just words but isn't radically changing our lives, why should our children think it would work for them? How we live in front of our children is essential. If our relationship with Jesus is not genuine enough to change us to be like Him, whatever else we say or do will have little effect.

Another essential ingredient in instructing our children concerning the things of the Lord is that we must never force it on them. This is an absolute principle. I repeat, we must never “force feed” our children spiritual things.

We must never violate their will when it comes to the things of the Lord. Not only does this not work, it violates the absolute principle of free will which God established. In applying earthly discipline,

involving the treating of rebellion and other such things about which we have been speaking, we need to violate their will, *but never concerning the things of the Lord!*

If our children don't want to hear, don't speak. If their ears and hearts are closed don't force them to listen. If you insist on pushing Jesus on your children, they will reject Him and it will turn them another way. Although you might not notice this, it will happen secretly in their hearts. It is so easy for a parent to dominate a child and force them concerning spiritual things, but it is a damaging, ungodly thing. It will not produce good fruit.

Parents must learn to walk in the Spirit when instructing their children about God. Wait for openings. Look for times when they are interested and hungry.

Children are naturally curious. They will ask questions. If and when they see us living something genuine and attractive, they will want to know more about it and will ask. When they do, then you can share with them. But, even then, tell them only as much as they want to hear, nothing more.

I call this the "baby bird" principle. When my sister and I were children, we would occasionally find a baby bird which had fallen out of its nest. Since we couldn't return the baby to the nest, we would try to take care for it. We dug up worms and found little bugs to feed it.

In this effort, I learned one thing. When the oversized beaks of these baby birds were open, you could feed them. When they were shut, nothing could persuade them to eat. It did no good to try to force them or to try to pry open their beaks. We had to respect the willingness of these baby birds.

It is the same way with children. When they are open to the things of the Lord and hungry, feed them as much as they can take. But when the beak shuts, don't force them. Then it is time to stop, wait and pray.

Think about it. God never, ever forces us to want Him or to do His will. He always respects our will, never violating it. Although He may work in our lives to correct us when we are closed to Him, He never forces us

or pushes us to do His will. Can we do to our children what God would never do to us? Can we, acting in His name, force our children concerning spiritual things in a way in which God would never act? I think not.

Do you remember Eve? There she was in the Garden of Eden with the forbidden fruit in her hand. She had her mouth open and was about to take a bite. With this one bite, she was going to destroy God's whole creation. With this one morsel, death would begin and all sorts of sin would be initiated.

Murder, rape, disease, war, theft, lying, cheating, hating, and all the evil things of which this world is full, would flourish. Even nature would be changed so that weeds would grow, animals would begin to kill and eat each other, some of them would be poisonous, insect pests would proliferate, and many other such things.

In spite of all these evils, God didn't stop her. He didn't even whisper saying, "Eve, pssst, Eve. What are you doing? Don't you remember what I said? Put that down!"

Instead, He respected her free will and allowed her to destroy His newly created earth. Can we then as His representatives act in a different way with our children? We must respect their free will concerning spiritual things.

How then are they going to become hungry for God and want spiritual things? It is through our living and our prayers. We must pray for them and we must live Christ in front of them in a way that is real and attractive. In this way they will open up to receive all that we can minister to them.

When they see our love, when they observe how we treat others, when they see us as humble, loving, forgiving people, they will desire this for themselves. Then, when they are open and hungry, we can share with them what God has revealed to us about Himself.

But if the testimony of our lives is not appealing, if our lives are different from what we pretend to believe, then we make it very hard for God to work in their lives.

It will do no good to “study the Bible,” have family prayers, or “go to church” if we, ourselves, are not changed into the image of Jesus. Children are good at detecting hypocrisy. Even if they don’t understand everything, they have an instinctive reaction to what is genuine.

The best thing we can do for our children is to yield our lives to God, to love Him and follow Him ourselves. It is to let Him fill us with Himself to such an extent that not only children, but all those around us will sense the sweet aroma of Jesus in our lives. This will draw our children and others to Him.

In this way, we will be able to instruct our children. Through our lives and words, they will learn about God and His ways. They will see His will through our actions and hear His word in our words. They will be drawn into a relationship with Him themselves which will lead to their salvation and transformation into His glorious image.

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GOD’S WORK IN US

Now we will return to the question of discipline. God Himself also uses pain today to discipline His own children. Many people who come to the Lord come to Him as undisciplined people. When they were young they were not disciplined so, when they are converted, they come to Him with a deep-seated rebellion still within their hearts.

Therefore, when God wishes to establish His authority over them, He encounters resistance and rebellion. This then brings His discipline. We read: “For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges {beats with a whip or rod} every son whom He receives” (Heb 12:6 NKJV).

Usually, His discipline is not physical beatings, yet it is still very painful and can be very long-lasting, sometimes for many, many years. This discipline by painful experiences is not a result of God’s anger. It is a result of His love for us. In His infinite wisdom, He knows that it is essential for our rebellion to be subdued and removed. For this purpose He uses our circumstances, our relationships, and other things to apply His rod of discipline to our lives.

God knows just where to apply His “rod” – where it really, really hurts. This is because He sees something in our hearts which needs treating. It needs to be broken and removed by discipline. He knows that this rebellion within us cannot be allowed to enter into His coming new creation. So, He lovingly applies the “rod” to us so that we can be fully prepared and submitted to Him when He comes.

When we discipline our children, we prepare them to receive and obey Jesus. We are taught: “Do not withhold correction from a child, for *if* you beat him with a rod, he will not die. You shall beat him with a rod, and deliver his soul from hell” (Pr 23:13,14). How is it then that such beatings “deliver his soul from hell?”

When we correctly discipline our children by helping break the rebellion within them, it prepares them for when Jesus enters their life and begins to reign over them.

Such disciplined individuals more easily accept the rulership of Christ and readily become His followers and disciples. If they have not been so prepared, Jesus must do this disciplining Himself. In some individuals, this takes many long years of pain, frustration, and difficulty, thus retarding their spiritual development.

I have seen many believers who came to Christ without discipline and with a strong, stubborn will, pass through unbelievable suffering. Some of them suffered intensely for more than 30 years. They “went through hell” figuratively speaking. Since they came to the Lord as adults, their unrestricted rebellion had become deeply entrenched and very strong.

Yet their parents could have spared them this suffering. Through properly using the rod, they could have prepared them for Divine rule.

We can be assured that no person with a rebellious heart will enter into the coming kingdom of God. So God will have to find a way to treat this rebellion. We have just spoken about how God uses suffering in the lives of His children to address this problem. Yet, some believers never respond to His discipline throughout their entire life. Therefore, God will need to find a cure for this serious condition before eternity begins. This treatment will be also severe and of long duration.

TRYING TO ESCAPE SUFFERING

Many Christians try to escape the suffering which they encounter by trying to get out of the situation which is causing them pain. Frequently, it is our relationships with other people which brings us discomfort and agony. Marriage, since it is the most intimate of all relationships, is often the hotbed of such pain.

Therefore, many imagine that a change of partners will alleviate the problem. They go from marriage to marriage, divorce to divorce trying to escape suffering. Many such people just jump from the frying pan into the fire. Subsequent marriages are not better, but only worse.

A friend of mine recently told me that of ten friends of hers who got divorced and remarried, nine of them desperately wished they were back with their first husbands.

When we suffer intensely, we cry and complain. We pray and pray. We seek desperately for a way out. Often we find none. This is because God is using our situation for our good. He is using His rod of pain to treat some deeply imbedded rebellion in us. We are trying to find a way out of the situation which God worked to get us into. He is lovingly using it for our eternal good. We are wanting to be saved from our suffering and yet God is trying to save us *through* our suffering.

When discipline comes to us, we should understand who sent it. It was our loving heavenly Father. We read: "Pay attention to the rod and the One who ordained it {or, the One who sent it}" (Micah 6:9 HCSV).

Furthermore, we should seek Him so that He can accomplish His work in us for which our painful situation was sent. If we are yielding and cooperative, things will go better.

Of course, this is hard to see in the moments of intense difficulty and pain. It doesn't seem like love to us. Yet, the scriptures tell us that this is so. We read: "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you are encircled with various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience" (Js 1:2,3 FLNT).

Also Peter says: "...even though now for a short time it has been necessary for you to be distressed by various trials. *These are necessary* for the testing of your faith, which is more valuable than gold that will be destroyed *and* which is now being tested by fire *but then* will be presented as a motive for praise, glory, and honor when Jesus the Anointed One appears" (1 Pet 1:6,7 FLNT).

When then will we escape our suffering and pain? It will be when it has produced God's results. It will be when we are no longer the same as we were before. It will be when our suffering has produced fruit – the peaceable fruit of His righteousness.

We read: "And you have totally forgotten the exhortation which reasons with you as with sons saying, 'My son, don't be inattentive to the discipline of the Lord or faint when you are corrected by him. For whom the Lord loves, *he* disciplines, and he chastises with a whip every son whom he receives.'

"If you experience *such* discipline, God is dealing with you as sons, for what son is there whom *his* father doesn't discipline? But if you are without disciplinary correction in which all *sons* share, then are you illegitimate and not sons. Furthermore, we had natural fathers who corrected us and we gave them *our* respect. Shouldn't we much more submit ourselves to the Father of spirits and *have more of his* life?

"For they, on the one hand, disciplined us for a short time as seemed right to them, but he, *on the other hand*, does it for *our* benefit so that we may share in his holiness. All *such* discipline doesn't seem to be enjoyable but painful at that moment, yet afterward it produces the peaceable fruit of *God's* righteousness in those who have been trained by it" (Heb 12:5-11 FLNT).

God is an excellent baker. He won't let the bread burn or become overdone. When we are ready, when the fire of our suffering has done its work and we are prepared, He will take us out of the furnace of our affliction and set us on His high places.

WHERE YOU LIVE

It may be what where you live is a country which has laws against physically disciplining your children. You may find yourself confronting some serious choices in this area. Will you obey society or God?

In such circumstances, a believer must use wisdom. It is not wise to discipline your children in front of others or in public. Sometimes discipline must wait until it can be done privately. Since God has given you children, He will help you find ways to obey Him in caring for them. Learn to hear from Him in this essential area of discipline.

CONCLUSION

No doubt there are many who will not agree that inflicting pain on the backside of their children is God's solution. These are those who can't stand the idea of administering this painful solution. They just don't want to hurt their child or just don't want to experience any emotional distress themselves. Perhaps they imagine that the rod of discipline is barbaric and a crude way to train children.

Others may think that such discipline is archaic and that "today's people" don't need to go to such extremes. There must be "better ways" to train children. So they try to invent their own solutions. These may be ideas which involve more reasoning with the child and lesser sorts of smaller "punishments" or deprivations to try to control their rebellion.

Such people seem to think that they know better than God. They imagine they have a deeper, better, or more tolerant understanding of human nature and how to deal with it. This, of course, is foolish thinking. The Maker knows exactly what works and what doesn't.

What such people don't realize is that these few, relatively short doses of intense physical pain will spare their children and those with whom they have relationships in the future many, many years of intense emotional pain. Furthermore, the emotional distress you might feel by causing your children this temporary pain, can never compare with the long-lasting distress you will feel if you don't discipline them.

The results of these infrequent, yet acute sessions with the rod are far superior than the results of not using it. The application of God's type

of discipline on a child will save your children and you also from the lifetime of agony which your child's untreated rebellion will cause you and them later on.

When God gives you children, obey Him in how to raise them. His way works. Yours won't. Don't imagine that you know more than God.

3.

GOD'S MONEY

How to manage money is a very important subject for every believer in Jesus Christ to understand. It is not hard to imagine that if we manage it well – that is, according to His leading – we will find His blessing and peace. We will find a certain satisfaction in knowing we are doing His will.

But, unless we have wisdom from Him, we may not have the same enjoyable experience. We may find ourselves in financial difficulty and uncomfortable situations. We may end up embarrassed and even bankrupt. We may find ourselves without things we need or want. If we wish to live without these unpleasant events and find God's blessing, we must understand how it is He wants us to manage our finances.

Perhaps the most basic and important fact we need to understand is that once we receive God's life through Jesus Christ, a radical change takes place in our lives. Although some may not realize it, a truly dramatic alteration occurs. This change is that we no longer belong to ourselves. We are no longer our own masters. The Bible teaches us that we have been bought with a price. Someone has purchased us. We have become someone else's slave. Therefore, we are no longer supposed to run our own life.

Before we opened up our lives to God, we were our own. We were free to do whatever we wanted with our time and money. But afterward, we no longer belong to ourselves. We belong to God. We read in 1 Corinthians, "You are no longer your own master because you have been purchased with a high price..." and, "You were bought with a

price.” (I Cor 6:19,20; 7:23 FLNT). The highest possible price has been paid for us. The God of the universe sacrificed the life of His own Son to redeem us.

Now it is right here that many Christians fail. It is very possible that many believers did not come to Christ with this most basic and important realization. Perhaps they came to Him because of some personal need. It is possible that they glimpsed Him through some message, book, or even through His creation. But far too many don't understand that coming to Jesus means giving up their own rights, their own directions, and even their own lives.

However, if we are to have success in our Christian walk and know His fulness, this is a question which must be settled. Who is going to run our life? Who is going to be the Master? Who is making the decisions? Is it us or is it God? Are we entering into His kingdom? In other words, are we crowning Him as our King? Are we living in obedience to Him? Are we really a “living sacrifice” laid upon His altar (Rm 12:1)? Or are we still running our own lives and just crying out to Him from time to time when things don't go as we wish they would.

Once we have the question decided about who is to run our lives, it becomes easier to find His blessing upon our finances. Without such a decision, it is impossible to realize financial contentment and peace.

When we decide to take Jesus as our Master, then we must also realize that our money is no longer “ours.” It now belongs to God. Therefore, we no longer have any right to decide what to do with it. It should no longer be under our control. We should not be the ones making the financial decisions for ourselves and our family. Any money we had, any money we have right now, and any money we might receive in the future is God's money, not ours.

The truth is that most financial difficulties in which Christians find themselves are a result of disobedience. They are a result of acting independently and not in obedience to their Master. This truth should be self-evident.

It is frequently the case that we have many “good ideas.” We have so many plans for how to live the way we want to, how to make more

money, how to invest in a way that will make us rich, or even how to do some mighty work for God.

But often, it appears that God doesn't seem to understand these things as clearly as we do. He doesn't seem to see how great our plans and ideas are. He doesn't seem to realize how successful we could be or how much money we could make if we just took certain steps with the money in our hands or even with the money which we could borrow.

So, since God seems so stodgy and slow to understand such things, we go ahead and act without His permission. We go ahead and follow our own ideas and plans. You can imagine how well such things turn out. It would seem that a child of God would soon see that his or her good ideas and "guaranteed successes" don't go as planned and they would begin to submit themselves to God and let Him govern their use of money.

Yet amazingly this is not so. So, many brothers and sisters suffer through financial difficulties year after year, repeating the same mistakes over and over and over again. They trust their own discernment and ability so much that they seem sure that sooner or later they will find the pot of gold.

Of course, from a distance, it seems so obvious that this will never work out. God simply won't let it. As long as His children are acting independently of Him with their finances, He will allow them to fail time and time again. He does this for their own good.

BORROWING MONEY

One of the ways in which many believers get into financial trouble is by borrowing money. This is a very common problem. They borrow money and then have trouble paying it back or even can't pay and so become bankrupt.

What then is God's way? First and foremost, it is to obey Him. Christians are not prohibited from borrowing money. Although we are exhorted to "owe no one anything" (Rm 13:8), this cannot be seen as an absolute prohibition on ever, in any circumstance, borrowing. For example, Jesus Himself borrowed a donkey for His entry into

Jerusalem. Also, the prophet Elisha instructed the widow to borrow a lot of “vessels” from her neighbors (II Kings 4:3).

However, we must be extremely careful in this area of borrowing. Our natural man, our flesh, has a very strong attachment to and dependence upon money. Much of today’s population is striving after this very thing. Therefore, when we think about borrowing, we must be very careful to hear from God.

We must not depend upon our own logic. We must not be guided by our own understanding of what would be “good business.” We cannot depend on what seems to be “a sure thing.” We dare not be led by our impulses, desires, analysis, or feelings. We must submit to and obey God. If and when we don’t, we will end up in trouble.

Why do we borrow money? Many times it is because we want to do something or to buy something for which we don’t have the resources. But why don’t we have the resources we need? Could it be that God has not given them to us for a reason? Could it be that it is not His will for us to have them? Have we stopped to ask our Master about this subject and so heard from Him?

Too often in such situations, we turn to our own strategies to try and get what we want or feel that we must have. Instead of through prayer and patience trusting God, we take matters into our own hands. This then might involve borrowing money.

Perhaps we want a new car or television. Maybe we want to remodel our home. Perhaps there’s some business deal that “just can’t go wrong” and will make us a lot of money. We desire things. We lust after them. We covet what others have and so we go after them by borrowing money. Possibly we use our credit card for this purpose.

When we do this, most of us imagine that we will be able to pay back what we borrowed. Perhaps our salary, or that of our spouse, seems sufficient to make the payments. Possibly we have some ideas of how we can use the profit from our investment of other people’s money to repay what we have borrowed.

Our reasoning for borrowing might seem solid. We might even convince others that we are doing the right thing. But only God knows the future.

For example, what if we and/or our spouse becomes ill tomorrow? What if the economy collapses? What happens if there is an accident, a fire, a flood, or any other kind of unpredictable event? Will we still be able to pay back what we borrowed? Maybe not.

If we have carefully obeyed God in whether or not we borrow, then we will have the assurance that everything will work out. If we have gone ahead and entered into financial obligations without consulting Him or obeying Him, many kinds of unpredictable events may interrupt our plans and put us in embarrassing and difficult situations.

I don't think it would be wise to try to make a list of things for which it is "O.K." for a Christian to borrow money. We cannot make this subject into a set of rules. Some, for example, might think buying a house or car would fit into this category, while something less "essential" like a new boat would not be God's will.

The only correct answer is to submit to God. We must genuinely and sincerely seek Him about the use of ALL our resources, including the question of whether or not we should borrow. Once again, we no longer belong to ourselves. We now have a Master to whom we owe obedience.

Very often, we borrow in disobedience to Him. We borrow because we desire something for which He has not provided. We are impatient to possess things or to increase our income. Our flesh is anxious to "become financially independent," to have things that others have, to satisfy our desires, or to get rich and so we risk borrowing money to "make it big." On the other hand, the scriptures teach us to be content with what we have.

John the baptizer told the soldiers that they should be content with their wages (Lk 3:14). Paul explains to the Philippians: "I have learned in whatever circumstances I am in to be content" (Phil 4:11 FLNT). In another place he says: "Therefore, if we have food and clothing, we will be content" (I Tim 6:8 FLNT). The author of Hebrews in chapter 13,

verse 5 says: “Stay free from the love of money. Be content with the things that you have” (FLNT). In other words, we should be content with what God has seen right to give us.

People often borrow because they lack faith. They don't trust that God has what is best for them in mind. They imagine that He doesn't understand their situation, their needs or their desires. Possibly, He expects them to “do something themselves.”

So, instead of asking Him, they take steps on their own. Perhaps they have prayed and prayed and still they don't have things they want. James explains to us the reason for this. He says, “...you ask and don't receive *it* because you ask wrongly, intending to waste *it* on self-satisfaction” (Js 4:3 FLNT). Very often, when we take certain steps in our life without consulting God, we end up in very bad, uncomfortable situations.

The Bible teaches us that “...the borrower is the servant of the lender” (Pr 22:7 KJV). When you borrow money, you become a servant to the one who loaned you that money. You are no longer free. You must work hard to repay that money and the interest which has been agreed upon. You cannot be free from this burden of service until you have paid what you owe. You, who are supposed to be a servant of God, have become the servant of a money lender.

Therefore, your time and attention have become divided. Instead of being free to spend your time and money serving Jesus, you have other obligations. Now you have to serve the person or institution to whom you owe money. How many of God's precious children are slaving away, trying to pay for things they have bought with credit, serving the god of this world instead of Jesus?

We are taught that it is a blessing to not be a borrower but to be a lender instead. Those who are obeying God and, therefore, experiencing His blessing, will not be those who are in debt, but those who are generous and are giving.

MONEY IS FOR GOD'S KINGDOM

Far too many believers have not yet come to understand that they no longer belong to themselves. If they have truly been “converted” then they belong to the Master. They are no longer supposed to be running their own lives. Consequently, their money too should no longer be under their control. If it is still under their own control, then they are living in disobedience to the Master.

When believers think their money is their own, then they spend it on themselves, seeking satisfaction. When they realize that it belongs to Another, then they can begin to spend it following His leading.

Our money is meant to be used for God and His kingdom. Our purposes, once we have received His new life inside of us, are no longer the same as they are for the rest of humanity. Most humans seek food, clothing, shelter, comfort, leisure and even luxury. Yet, Jesus teaches that we should not seek after these things, but instead seek the kingdom of God (Mt 6:33). If we are still using our money in the same way as the unconverted, we reveal that our lives are not really submitted to Jesus.

How then can we use our money for God’s kingdom? The following thoughts are not meant to be a complete list, but only a little example of the things for which God might wish to use our money.

Right up at the top of this “list” is giving to those who are poor. Paul and the other brothers in the early church, were anxious to help the destitute (Gal 2:10). Jesus Himself instructs us to give (Lk 6:38). Psalm 112 verse 9 shows us how much God approves of our giving to the poor.

We read: “He has dispersed abroad; he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever; his horn will be exalted with honor.” In fact, the whole of the scriptures is replete with the idea that God’s people should be generous with the money which God has seen fit to place in their hands.

Now it is obvious that we are not going to resolve the whole of the world’s poverty with our limited financial means. But, there are certainly some things which we can do to alleviate suffering. Paul teaches us that this applies principally to other believers, although the sufferings of unbelievers are not excluded (Gal 6:10). Therefore, we

should always be attentive to our Lord to see how, when, and where He would like us to help others.

We need to be guided by God in these questions. It is very easy to err on two sides of the question. On one hand, it is easy to be tightfisted and not give very much or very often. On the other hand, it is also easy to be led by human sentiments and fail to hear the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But we should be constantly alert for opportunities to help others financially, especially other brothers and sisters in Christ.

It seems better to try to help by giving in a way which results in lasting value rather than just throwing money at a problem. Probably everyone knows the saying: "Instead of giving people fish, teach them how to fish." This means to seek for some way to give lasting help which will enable people be able to support themselves instead of providing a temporary fix.

Some may need a car to help them get to work or some need work done on their homes. Others can be helped by aiding them to start a small business or to improve what they are already doing. New equipment for their job or profession can be very helpful. There are many practical ways to help others if we are willing and open to the Lord. Every believer, if they are walking in obedience, should be involved in helping others financially.

One of the most important ingredients here is prayer. We must let the Master guide us when we help others. After all, it's His money!

Sometimes we may find ourselves trying to help others whom God is disciplining. Perhaps He is using their suffering to work on their character or to correct their constant disobedience in the area of money. Obviously, we do not want to sit by and let others starve.

But if and when we enter in and try to help those whom God is disciplining, we will end up taking a few swats ourselves. Take this from someone who has had a lot of experience in this area. Often, not only our help does not end up helping, but we become involved in money-losing and embarrassing efforts also.

An example of this might be trying to help those who are forever in debt. Usually, they are in debt because they are disobeying God in their use of His money. You can try to help them again and again. But until they actually repent of their disobedience and learn to wait on the Lord for guidance concerning their money, no matter how many times you bail them out of debt, they will fall into it again.

When you try to help in these situations, your money will be gone and no good will have come from it. Perhaps it will even encourage the constantly indebted person to continue with his misuse of God's money.

Another area where we can use our money for the kingdom of God is to support those who are doing God's work. Here too we need the Master's guidance. As you no doubt know, not everyone who claims to be working for God is actually doing His will. There are many charlatans who use their gifts and the name of God to enrich themselves. So, we need to hear from Him about whom to support.

Actually, giving to those who have plenty can be bad for us spiritually. Proverbs 22:16 teaches us that: "...he who gives to the rich, *will surely come* to poverty (NKJV)." So, if some preacher or other is claiming that his wealth is "from God" and if you give to him you will become wealthy too, you can know from the scriptures that this is a lie. Exactly the opposite will happen. Don't give to the rich.

It seems wiser to try to help those who are really doing the work of the Lord and don't have a lot of other supporters. It would appear to be a better use of God's money than giving it to organizations where a large percentage of the money is consumed with bureaucratic salaries and huge overhead expenses. Furthermore, anyone who is getting rich off the gospel is obviously not following the footsteps of Jesus.

There are many verses in the New Testament which teach us that those who do the Lord's work are worthy of our support. When we help them we will also share in their future rewards. It is a very healthy thing to use our money – which is inherently earthly and even an idol to those of the world – to promote what God is doing.

Of course, He doesn't need our money, but we should consider it a privilege to be able to be a part of what He is doing. Furthermore, it is

absolutely the best investment we can make with our money. It will yield returns for all eternity and they will be the kind of returns which are so great that we can hardly imagine them.

I am not speaking here about “tithing” to a “church” or some religious institution if we are members of one. In many respects, this is not giving to God but to ourselves. For example, if we were members of some club or other we would have to pay monthly dues. These dues cover the expenses of the club. These expenses would include maintenance, repairs, salaries, utility bills, taxes (if any) and other such things. We don’t call this “giving to others” but rather we are paying our part of the expenses.

A very similar thought could be applied to our membership in some kind of religious organization. If you are a member, you should pay your part. That much is true. However, let’s not call that “giving to God.” Let’s call it paying your part of something from which you benefit. The lighting, the roof overhead, the parking, etc. are things from which you benefit.

Perhaps this organization of which you are a member has some other projects which it supports which are over and above the “dues” of each one. In such cases, if the work is truly of the Lord, then this could be considered as giving. If not, then we are only fooling ourselves.

It is true that frequently the “tithe” of the Old Testament was for “the house of God.” But surely we all know from reading the New Testament that the house of God is not a building.

Furthermore, it is not and never has been a religious organization. God’s house today is people. It is men and women who have His life born into them. Therefore, giving or “tithing” to His house is giving to other members of His body to whom He leads us to give. It is not to support a building or the religious institution which uses that building.

Many today speak about “tithing” taking their verses from the Old Testament. This principle was that we should give ten percent of what we gain to the Lord. However, now we are no longer in the Old Testament but are part of a New Covenant. Things have changed. Does

this mean that we no longer should give away the money which is in our hands?

No! Instead, we should be giving even more. In the beginning of this article we saw that it is not just “ten percent” which belongs to God. Now it is one hundred percent! We should not have any of “our own money” anymore. It is all His! Therefore, all of it should be available for Him to distribute to others through us as He wills.

GIVING IS AGAINST THE NATURE OF THE FLESH

Men trust in money. Having a lot of it seems like security to us. Not having it seems perilous. Yet our Master wants us to have our security in Him, not in money. So, part of His training for us is to lead us to give money away. Instead of hoarding it, He leads us to give to others.

This is part of His plan to help us not to cling to it and trust it as our security. This is something which our flesh often resists and resists strongly. It is only by following Jesus in giving and giving generously over and over again that we loosen our grip on money as our security.

One precept we read about in the Old Testament is called “the first fruits.” This was an offering which the Jews were to give the Lord from their harvests. This was not the leftovers. It was not the excess which they didn’t really need. Instead, they were to take the very first part of their harvest and give it to the Lord.

Now that goes directly against the tendencies of our flesh. We would like to pay our bills first, buy what we think we need and want, and then, if there is something left over, give a little bit of it to the work of the Lord. But the Lord’s idea is to “honor” Him by giving to Him first. After all, it is He who is entrusting us with this money.

Therefore, giving first to Him is a declaration of our thanks to Him and our trust in Him. When we set aside something to give away before spending any on ourselves, we honor Him. Afterwards, we should seek Him so that we can be following His leading in where and to whom we should give what we have set aside.

This “setting aside something first” is not a law. However, it is a very healthy practice. Not only does it go against our flesh, but it is a very special way to honor God. How much we should set aside from our “first fruits” is up to us and God. We are not under any law here. Yet there are some important spiritual truths of which we should be aware.

THE “MEASURE”

When we give to God by giving to others, we always use some kind of “measure.” Perhaps we calculate a percentage. Maybe we give what we feel we can afford. There is always something in our heart and our mind which governs our giving. This is our “measure.”

Now Jesus taught us something about this measure. He says: “For the same measure you use when you give to others will be used when it is time to give back to you” (Lk 6:38 FLNT). So we see that when it is our turn to receive, God will use the same measure that we did when we gave. If we are generous, God will be generous with us. If we are stingy, holding back most of what we have, God will be stingy with us. If we gave what was left over, after we had paid our bills and spent money on ourselves, we will receive what is left over.

This is a timeless truth. It supersedes the law. This principle seems even to be in effect for unbelievers. God, who sees the hearts, will use our “measure” for us also.

God is very generous. He has lovingly provided a complete salvation for us. He has given this to us freely, without cost. Therefore, we too should be generous with others. We should open our heart and our hands to them. In this way, God will also be generous with us. God “...loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor 9:7).

We should always be looking for ways to invest in God’s kingdom. It is the world’s best investment. The rewards never end. So, as we walk with Jesus, we should be sensitive to Him about where we can invest in His work so that we can be co-laborers with Him. If we are open and willing, if our hearts are unattached to what we have, then we will find many opportunities to serve Him with the money and things He has given us.

ANXIOUS TO GET RICH

Unfortunately, there are some in the body of Christ who are anxious to get rich. These fall into a special category. This category is those whom God will punish. We read: "...he who hastens {is in a hurry} to be rich will not go unpunished" (Pr 28:20 NKJV). Did you notice that this is stated as a fact? This is not something which may or may not happen. It is guaranteed! It is one of God's promises.

Due to their burning desire to get wealth, many believers end up doing many risky and unwise things with their money. Often, they borrow from others to try to move forward with their schemes.

Since their Master has not approved of what they are doing with their lives and His money, He sees to it that it becomes a punishment for them. Their failures and the consequences of them become a chastisement for them.

James teaches us that "...those who make up their mind to be rich fall into many difficulties and a trap, *by following* many foolish and harmful desires which drown men in losses and destruction" (1 Tim 6:9 FLNT).

Did you notice the word "losses?" Such people will certainly lose money, even the money they already had. Their efforts to become rich will cause them and their families much suffering. These disobedient projects will even end up destroying their lives and the lives of their families. It is not uncommon for marriages and the lives of their children to be destroyed through such rebellious uses of money.

Peter also speaks about such persons when speaking about independent, unholy believers. He says, "*They* have a heart which is trained in *the* desire for wealth, and *consequently* they are children who are cursed" (2 Pet 2:14 FLNT). It is clear that you don't want to be included in this category, i.e, those who are cursed.

It would probably be a good idea to read a few more passages of the Bible here and see just what it teaches us. For example, in Matthew 6:19-21 Jesus says: "Don't store up wealth for yourselves on the earth, where moth *larva* and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal. But store up wealth for yourselves in heaven, where neither moth

larva nor rust consume and where thieves do not break in and steal, because where your wealth is, that is where your heart will be also" (FLNT).

Jesus is very interested in where our heart is. When it is given to Him and subjected to His will, He will bless us. When it is given to money and the things of this world, we are living in spiritual adultery and we will suffer His discipline. Our God is very jealous about our heart (Pr 23:26). He will never financially bless those who love money.

He also taught us in Matthew 13:22: "And the word that was sown among the thorns, this is he who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of *pursuing* wealth choke the word and he becomes unfruitful" (FLNT).

And further along we read: "And Jesus looked around him and said to his disciples, 'How difficult it is to persuade those who have wealth to enter into the kingdom of God!'" (Mk 10:23 FLNT). In Luke 6:24 Jesus warns: "... woe to you who are wealthy! For you have already received what you have coming to you" (FLNT).

Also in Luke 12:15 He says: "Watch *yourself* and keep yourselves from all desire for wealth, for a man's life is not made up of the abundance of the things which he possesses" (FLNT).

In the book of Romans, Paul lists "the desire for wealth" along with other very repugnant sins. We read: "God gave them over to have a degenerate mind, doing those things which are not right, being filled with all *kinds of* unrighteousness: sexual immorality, hatred, **the desire for wealth**, the impulse to injure others; *being* full of envy, murder, arguments, cheating, *and* moral depravity" (Rm 1:28,29 FLNT).

Paul also exhorts us saying: "But as it is, I wrote to you not to have fellowship with anyone who is called a brother but who is practicing sex outside of the marriage union, or *is* **eager for wealth**, or is someone who worships something other than God [openly or in his heart], or is someone who speaks badly about others, or is a drunkard, or *is* a person who takes advantage of others. Don't even share a meal with someone like that" (1 Cor 5:11 FLNT).

Also he states: “Or don’t you know that the unrighteous will not inherit the *coming* kingdom of God? Don’t be deceived: neither those who have sex outside of marriage, nor those who worship something besides God; nor adulterers, nor cross dressers, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor **those who are eager for wealth**, nor drunkards; nor slanderers, nor those who take advantage of others will inherit the kingdom of God [the millennial kingdom]” (I Cor 6:9,10 FLNT).

In Ephesians 5:3 we read: “But don’t let such things as sex outside of the marriage bond and all sexual impurity or **the desire for wealth** even be mentioned among you, which is the characteristic of those set apart to God” (FLNT).

Colossians 3:5 tells us: “Be putting to death, therefore, that which is part of your earthly nature: *i.e.* sex outside of the marriage bond, unclean sexual acts, lustfulness, longing for what is prohibited, and **seeking wealth which is really worshipping money as an idol**. It is because of these things that the wrath of God is coming on the sons of disobedience”(FLNT).

You see, being eager for or desiring wealth is sin. It is against the nature of God. His thought is that we should trust in Him to provide for us and then be content with whatever He gives us. Anything more than that is sin. And when you are walking in sin, you invite the discipline of God into your life.

Very often, God uses the very thing which we desire – which is not His will but we persist in pursuing – to be our discipline. The frustration, anguish, embarrassment, and stress (both to ourselves and our families) which we experience because of our disobedience, God uses to discipline us. Hopefully, we will begin to understand His discipline and repent for our pursuit of wealth and success. Don’t be in a rush to get rich. You will suffer for it.

REFLECTING THE MASTER’S NATURE

Since we are supposed to be obeying our Master in what we do with His money which He has placed in our care, it is clear that our actions with this money should reflect His nature.

For example: God is honest. He never cheats anyone. Therefore, when we are led by Him, we too will behave this way. When we deal with others in financial situations, there is never any need to cheat them, lie to them, or in some way take advantage of them. We should never be involved in sneaky, underhanded schemes to make money. Since our trust is in God and not in money, there is never any need to try to get more than is fair and right from anyone. He is our supply of all that we need.

Furthermore, when God says something, He always carries through with what He said. We too then, should behave in this same way. When we make a financial agreement, we must keep it. When we agree to buy or sell something for a certain price, or give someone something, then we must keep our word.

This is true even if we discover that what we agreed upon will not turn out to make money and/or that it will be disadvantageous for us. The scripture reads: "Lord, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill? He who walks uprightly, and works righteousness... He who swears to his own hurt {disadvantage} and does not change" (Ps 15:1,2,4 KJV). This is the nature of God who is our Master.

The believer who is submitted to God in his use of God's money will always pay back what he borrowed. We read: "The wicked borrows and does not repay, but the righteous shows mercy and gives" (Ps 37:21 KJV). Those who borrow and then don't pay back what they borrowed reveal that they are in rebellion against God. He considers them to be "wicked."

When we enter into a contract with someone – that is we make a binding agreement with them – heaven takes notice. Our agreement is recorded there and God considers it binding upon us. If we then break this agreement and don't fulfill our word, God will not bless us. He may even see fit to discipline us for our unfaithfulness to Him.

If we have made a poor bargain but succeed in persuading the other party to loose us from this contract, then, and only then, does God consider the contract to be no longer binding.

We read: "...whatever binding agreements {contracts} you make on earth will be bound in the heavens and whatever binding agreements {contracts} you reverse on earth will be loosed in the heavens" (Mt 16:19). This is an eternal truth.

Since we are trusting in God and not in money, if we have employees, there is no justification for not paying them a good salary. We should always treat them justly as our Master would. If and when we try to be miserly and tightfisted with them, they will be unhappy. They will complain and even curse us in their hearts.

Furthermore, they may cry out to our Master in their misery and He will hear them. When He hears them, He will take action against us. This is not something we want to experience.

We are reminded: "*Don't you* remember the wages of the laborers who reaped your fields, the ones whom you took advantage of and underpaid? *Those laborers* are crying out and the cries of the reapers have entered into the ears of the Lord of the Sabbath" (Jn 5:4 FLNT). God is watching and is aware of all our thoughts and actions. When we are trusting only in Him and not in money we will not be unfair with others.

WHERE IS THE BLESSING?

There are many believers who are not "blessed" financially. They are always short of money. They never seem to have an abundance or even enough for what they need. They are not known to be generous with others. Some are continually in debt and, therefore, always chasing after money to try to pay what they owe. Why is this? The answer is that they are living in disobedience. They are not following Jesus in how they use the money that has been entrusted to them.

Some of these are those who do not give when Jesus wants to give to others. They are tight-fisted, greedy, afraid of not having enough for themselves, untrusting, disobedient children of God. Since they do not obey Him in giving to others, He cannot bless them with more. Therefore, they are constantly short of money.

Others who aren't blessed are those who don't obey Jesus when they spend money. They buy things when He is saying "No." They spend money on self-satisfaction but not on His kingdom. They want what others have or crave "things" to satisfy ego and impress others. Their spending is not done in obedience to Jesus. Therefore, they never have enough.

Still others borrow money without asking Him first. They buy things on credit (which is just another form of borrowing) without consulting with their Master. They take financial risks by borrowing money, acting independently from God. Their use of money is completely out of the control of Jesus. Since they are disobedient, God cannot and, in fact, will not bless them. It is their own rebellion which causes them this suffering of never having all that they need.

We should ask ourselves, did God authorize the purchase of that new car, sofa, house, etc. which we just spent His money on? Did He lead us to put our children in that expensive school, invest in that retirement account, or buy that insurance policy? Or was it just following what the world expects us to do? Was it simply our idea of what would be right, prudent, and expected of us or did Jesus lead us to do it?

Many Christians follow the patterns and expectations of the world instead of their Master in financial matters. They seem to assume that because "everyone else" is doing it, it must be right. Yet we cannot expect God's blessing when we follow the patterns of the world instead of receiving direction from Him.

One reason our Master puts money into our hands is to see what we will do with it. It is a test for us. Since the human race depends on money and the human heart so easily desperately clings to it, God wants to see how we react when we have money.

If we faithfully follow Him in the use of money, He notices. If we follow our own fallen, human tendencies and do unrighteous things, He also sees this. There are very few things which expose our hearts so much as how we use money. God will deal with us today, whether it be blessings or corrections, according to how we use His money. Furthermore, He

will reward us when He comes according to how we used what He gave us.

FAITHFULNESS

Jesus says: “He who is faithful with very little *things* will also be faithful with much. And he who is unrighteous in very little things will also be unrighteous with much. If, therefore, you have not been faithful with unrighteous, *worldly* wealth, who will trust you *enough* to give you the true *riches*? And if you have not been faithful in that which belongs to someone else [in our discussion this is God], who will give you that which is your own? (Luke 16:10-12 FLNT).

The “true riches” mentioned here are not money. They are the eternal, truly precious things from God Himself. Right now our money does not belong to us. It belongs to “someone else,” our Master. Yet, if we are faithful to Him in its use, and, in fact, in all of our living, He will give us true wealth of our own. This does not consist of “things” which we will receive, but of power, glory, and honor which will be ours.

In summation, God must be the Lord of our lives and our money. We must make a conscious decision, perhaps more than once, probably even again and again, to deliver control over our financial situation to Him.

If we do this, we will find contentment, satisfaction, eternal rewards, and great joy. If we fail in this area, we will find discipline, unhappiness, stress and sorrow. Today, right now, is the time to yield your life and money to Him.

Note: This chapter about using money, presupposes that the reader has an intimate, personal relationship with Jesus. Knowing what God wants us to do with His money cannot be completely understood simply by following the Bible or other financial precepts, even if they are biblical.

Although following such precepts can perhaps be of use to those who do not enjoy a close communion with Jesus, the greatest blessing, which comes from His personal leading, can only be gained by knowing Him in a real, intimate, daily way.

It is not the primary purpose of this chapter to try to help the reader in this area of intimacy with God. Therefore, the author would like to recommend some other books for this purpose, which are offered without cost to the reader. These are *From Glory to Glory* and *Repentance Unto Life*.

These books are available without cost from the website:
www.agrainofwheat.com

4.

THE LAW

In Ephesians 4:14 Paul speaks about something he calls a “wind of doctrine.” He urges us on to spiritual maturity so that “...we should no longer be children tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine...”(NKJV).

Observing the Christian church through the years, one notices that every so often a new doctrine comes along, blowing through the church and sweeping numerous gullible believers along with it. The subject of these “winds” is not necessarily important but has included things such as: “being slain in the Spirit,” “discipleship,” “getting golden teeth,” “Jesus coming back in 1988,” “barking like dogs,” and “returning to Judaism.”

This return to Judaism appears to have several streams such as: returning to the practice of the Jewish festivals, pronouncing the name of Jesus correctly in Hebrew, and keeping the Jewish law (at least those parts of the law these folks find convenient to keep).

It is interesting that Paul calls these phenomenon “winds.” This word is reminiscent of how we are taught that angels are called “winds” or “spirits” (Heb 1:7). You probably realize that angelic spirits, be they on God’s side or on the side of the darkness, have power. They can influence the minds of large numbers of people very quickly. A sudden thought or idea can impel entire populations in a given direction in a very short time.

An example of such powerful influences of spirits is given to us in the book of Revelation 16:14 where we read: "These are spirits of evil deities *which* do signs, going out to the kings of the entire world to gather them together for the battle of the great day of the Almighty God" (FLNT).

In the case we are discussing, it is the believers who are influenced by such powerful beings, being deceived by them to go chasing after some new Christian fad, practice or teaching. This seems to be a very common phenomenon today.

In his day, Paul was constantly "battling," through his writing and teaching, with those who were insisting on the practice of Judaism. This theme is persistent throughout his writings. It seems that there were many converted Jews who did not understand the gospel message thoroughly. They still wanted to cling to their old religious ways.

To combat this message and tendency, Paul used many and various arguments. We will spend some time here and examine some of them. Although many readers may wonder why this subject is even being discussed – perhaps thinking that the book of Galatians should be enough to persuade anyone and everyone – this does not seem to be the case.

Let us begin by examining a passage in Matthew 5:17,18 which many quote in their attempts to justify a return to, or a keeping of, the law. We read: "Do not think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I did not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one jot or one tittle will in any way pass away from the law, until all things are fulfilled" (FLNT).

Please notice that Jesus did not say the law would not pass away until it all was thoroughly, finally and correctly kept. Instead, He used the word "fulfilled." This Greek word *PLEROO* means: "to make full, complete, consummate."

It is beyond question that the Old Testament law was full of typology. It was sort of a prefiguring or "shadow" of the spiritual realities which were to come to us in Jesus Christ. Hebrews 10:1 teaches us: "For the law, being a shadow of the good things to come and not the very

substance of those things, can never make those who draw near perfect..." (FLNT).

In Colossians 2:17, after listing a number of the demands of the law, including what kind of food you eat and drink, or observing the feast days or the Sabbath day, Paul says: "This is because these things are just a shadow of the *spiritual* things *which were* to come, but the fulfillment {or substance} of them is now in the Anointed One"(FLNT).

There is no doubt that Jesus, in His life, death and resurrection, partially fulfilled the law. One of the most obvious fulfillments was the legislation concerning the necessity of the Jews sacrificing a lamb on the day of Passover. It seems obvious that Jesus fulfilled this "shadow" of the law with the sacrifice of Himself so that God would "pass over" our sins and not condemn us to destruction.

There are also countless other aspects of the law that Jesus fulfilled, completed and consummated. Yet this is only a part of what God means when He speaks about the law being "fulfilled" in Matthew.

You see, the law is a kind of definition of God's righteousness. It is sort of an abbreviated form of, or a description of, the character of God. What he is like, of what He approves and disapproves, what harmonizes with His character and what doesn't, is written down for us in His law.

I use the word "abbreviated" here because it is impossible, with human words, to describe the totality of God's holiness and righteousness.

God gave us His law so that we could understand a little of who and what He is. One of His desires in so doing was that man would become holy as He is.

This is very important. God really does want us to become holy. As part of this project on His part, He gave us His law so that we could glimpse a small part of His holiness. Although the history of the Jews shows us that this law-giving was not powerful enough to accomplish God's objective, He has not given up on this goal to make us holy. He is still working on this project today, however now He is working in a new and living way through Jesus Christ.

When we speak of fulfilling the law, we mean to say that its objectives are being accomplished. It means that God's purposes in giving the law have been completed. Simply adhering strictly to the law is not "fulfilling" it.

When Jesus lived His life on this earth, He lived out this God's righteousness. He never once did or said anything which violated God's holy nature. His life, including His speech, actions, attitudes and even the expression of His face, expressed the Father's holiness in every way. This was one of the ways in which He fulfilled the law.

Yet this was not the end. We already stated that Jesus' fulfillment of the law was "partial." Why is that? Did He fail in some way? No! It is because it is God's will for His people, His church to also "fulfill" the law. This means that we too are supposed to live out a genuine righteousness: the righteousness of God himself. Jesus' fulfillment of the law was limited because it only involved one person. Now God's will is for this fulfillment to occur in a much larger way.

How is this going to happen? Is it accomplished by following the law or being filled with the life of the Father? Is it done by human efforts or willpower, determination, etc? Of course not! It is done by the holy life of Jesus living in us.

Romans 8:4 teaches us that God's Son did His work: "...so that the ordinances of the law would be fulfilled in those who don't conduct their lives following the flesh [which includes keeping the law] but following the Spirit" (FLNT). You see, in believers also there is supposed to be an ongoing, daily fulfillment of God's law. Jesus' plan is not to do away with law. It is also not for us to continue trying to keep it. Instead it is to fulfill it by His living in us and through us.

To combat the tendency of those who did not really understand the gospel message and were trying to revert to keeping the law, Paul used various types of arguments. He was trying, through many different means, to show believers that the law is no longer in force for them.

One of these arguments, which we read about in Romans 7:1-6, involves the picture of marriage. Paul reminds us that, according to the law, a woman is "bound" to her husband as long as he is alive. But if he dies,

she is freed from the bond of the law to her husband. He then states that: "...you also have died to the law [which was our previous 'husband'] through the body of the Anointed one, so that you could be *legally* 'married' to another, even to the One who has risen from the dead, so that we would bear fruit to God" (FLNT).

Wait a minute. Did he say that we "have died to the law"? In verse one of this same chapter Paul says: "...the law has dominion over a man as long as he is alive?" But if we are dead – that is we have died with Jesus – then the law can no longer be considered to be in force. It has no application and can have no application to dead men which is what Paul insists that we are.

Furthermore, by saying that we should "be bearing fruit to God" (vs 4) he means that we should be exhibiting Jesus' righteousness or "fulfilling the law" instead of keeping it. In Philippians 3:9 Paul reaffirms this by saying: "*I want to be found in him not have a righteousness of my own which comes from keeping the law but one which is through the faith of the Anointed One, i.e. God's own righteousness which is ours through faith*" (FLNT).

Let us read another passage together. "For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which are *exposed* through the law worked in our members to bring forth the fruit of death. But now we have been freed from *the demands* of the law – dying to that in which we were held – so that we can be serving in newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter of *the law*" (Rm 7:5,6 FLNT). This then is one of Paul's very strong arguments: we are now dead and therefore the law does not apply to us.

Paul reinforces his argument about our death putting an end to the law saying: "For since I 'legally' died *with the Anointed One*, I died to the law also, in order that God would *now* be my life *source*" (Gal 2:19 FLNT).

Another one of Paul's arguments against the law is that these "ordinances" have been blotted out. We read in Colossians 2:14: "He blots out the array of written ordinances which were against us and even opposed to us. He has taken it out of the way, nailing it to the cross."

Obviously, these “ordinances” are the demands of the law which Moses wrote down. Then he continues his argument in verse 16 saying: “Therefore, *since the written ordinances have been ‘blotted out,’* let no one judge you with respect to *religious ordinances such as* what kind of meat you eat, what you drink, or concerning a *religious* feast day, or *observing* a new moon, or a Sabbath day. This is because these things are just a shadow of the *spiritual* things *which were* to come, but the fulfillment of them is *now* in the Anointed One” (FLNT).

Paul then repeats his earlier argument concerning our death and how it impacts our relationship to the law. He says in verses 20 and 21: “Since you died with the Anointed One to the essence of this world, why, as though still a part of the world do you subject yourselves to earthly, *religious* ordinances *such as*: don’t touch this, don’t eat that, or don’t handle some other thing? These are *just regulations* concerning perishable things, all of which are destined for destruction.” Obviously such human ordinances have no value to dead people.

Another of Paul’s arguments against lawkeeping by believers has to do with a curse. He reasons: “For everyone who depends on the works of the law *to be right with God* is under a curse...” (Gal 3:10 FLNT). Why should depending on the law, which was given by God, bring us under a curse? It is because we can’t do it. We are not strong enough to keep the law. Even with the “help” of the Holy Spirit we just can’t do it.

Therefore, since we end up failing to keep it, we come under the curse of not keeping the law. Paul then shows us how Jesus took this curse upon Himself by being crucified thus freeing us from trying to keep the law which brings us under this curse.

Paul teaches us that: “For the Anointed One is the end of the law resulting in righteousness for everyone who is believing” (Rm 10:4 FLNT). So, Paul says that Jesus is the “end of the law.”

How can this be when Jesus taught us that the law would not pass away? It must be that in Jesus we fulfill the law. It is ended by being fulfilled. Please notice that this happens by our living, ongoing faith. We are freed from the old law so that we can be governed by another law.

This new law is called: “The law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus” (Rm 8:2 NKJV).

Paul also teaches us that the law is being “discarded.” In the passage of 2 Corinthians 3:7-13 he speaks about the “ministry of condemnation” which was written by “engraving on stones.” This then must refer to the ten commandments which were written on two stone tablets and, by implication, the entire Old Testament law.

He then tell us that this “ministry of condemnation” is “being discarded. “For if that which is being discarded had glory, that which remains is much more glorious” (2 Cor 3:11 FLNT). This word translated “discarded” here in Greek is KATARGEO which means:

According to Dodson:

I bring to naught, sever, abolish

(a) I make idle (inactive), make of no effect,

annul, abolish, bring to naught, (b) I discharge, sever, separate from.

According to Strong:

to be (render) entirely idle (useless), literally or figuratively

According to Thayer:

1) to render idle, unemployed, inactivate, inoperative

1a) to cause a person or thing to have no further efficacy

1b) to deprive of force, influence, power

2) to cause to cease, put an end to, do away with, annul, abolish

2a) to cease, to pass away, be done away

2b) to be severed from, separated from, discharged from, loosed from any one

Paul explains that even though this “ministry of condemnation” had a kind of glory, there is an even greater glory. That is the glory of Jesus living out His life through us.

TAKING AWAY THE VEIL

Further on, using the analogy of the veil Moses put over his face to hide the glory which shone there, he speaks about a veil which is covering the minds of the Jewish people. He then says that this veil remains over them. They cannot see clearly. What is it that they can't see? It is that: "...it is not being revealed to them that *the old covenant* is discarded in the Anointed One" (2 Cor 3:14 FLNT).

Now some might think that it is the "veil" which is being discarded according to these verses. But no, it is the taking away of the veil that lets them see what is *really* being discarded. It is the Old Covenant which is discarded in Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, for many today this veil still remains in place.

In chapter four of Galatians, Paul spends a lot of time developing a theme. This theme is that those who are "under the law" – that is those obligated to keep it – are in bondage. This bondage is so severe that he compares it to being a slave. In essence, he says that before we knew Christ, "...we were enslaved under the earthly principles *of the law*" (Gal 4:3 FLNT). "But when the time came for the fulfillment *of his purposes*, God sent forth his son, born of a woman, born under the law, so that he could release by ransom those who were under the law..." (Gal 4:4,5 FLNT).

Later in this same chapter he continues with this theme using the allegory of Hagar (the maid of Abraham's wife, with whom he had a son) and his son Isaac who was born from his true wife.

He begins by saying: "Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, don't you understand what the law says?" "These things contain an allegory. For these women represent two covenants. One is from mount Sinai, bearing children for bondage *to the law*, which is Hagar. Now this Hagar is mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the Jerusalem that now is, for she is in bondage *to the law* with her children" Gal 4:24,25 FLNT).

Paul concludes this explanation by saying: "For freedom the Anointed One set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and don't be tangled up again in a yoke of bondage *to the law*" (Gal 5:1 FLNT).

In fact, a careful reading of the entire letter to the Galatians makes it very clear that God has something much better in mind for us than trying to practice the law. “For you, brethren, were called to freedom. Only don’t use your freedom as an opportunity to gratify the flesh, but through love serve each other as slaves. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Gal 5:13,14 FLNT).

Of what use then is the law? The law is useful to convict us of sin. Paul teaches us that the law is sort of a tutor or schoolmaster. Its purpose is to teach us about righteousness and so bring us to Christ to attain that righteousness.

We read: “So the law has become our tutor to bring us to the Anointed One so that we might be being considered just through faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor (*the law*). For you are all children of God through faith in the Anointed One, Jesus” (Gal 3:24,25 FLNT).

Paul also teaches about another reason for the law. We read in 1 Timothy 1:8-11 “But we know that the law is good if a man uses it correctly, which is using it with the following understanding: that the law is not made for a righteous man but for the rebellious and the unrighteous; for the ungodly and the sinners; for the unholy and the morally unrestrained; for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers; for assassins; for the sexually immoral; for pedophiles; for kidnappers; for liars; for those who don’t keep their word; and for those who practice anything else which is in opposition to healthy teaching and not in harmony with the message of good news of the glory of the blessed God with which I was entrusted.”

When we receive the life of God through Jesus, we should be being made righteous from the inside out. We should be expressing God’s own holiness more and more.

But if we are not; that is, if we are resisting the operation of the Holy Spirit to convict us of some sin in our life, then the law can show us where we are wrong. It can’t fix the problem, but it can certainly shine light into us so that we can see where we are not righteous as God is.

THE WRITER OF HEBREWS

The writer of Hebrews makes another kind of argument concerning the law. His reasoning concerns the priesthood. He reminds us that the priesthood of Aaron was established through the law of Moses. Then he shows us that today Jesus is our High Priest similar to Melchizedek of the Old Testament. He then reasons that to have a new priest from a tribe which does not descend from Levi requires a change of the law.

Since it was by the Old Testament law that Aaron and his descendants were made priests something must change. He says: "For when the priesthood is changed it becomes necessary to change the law also" (Heb 7:12 FLNT).

He goes on to say that God's oath which He swore to make Jesus a priest "annuls" the previous law from which Aaron derived his priesthood. We read: "For in this pronouncement [of verse 7:17] there is an annulling of the previous commandment..." (Heb 7:18). If, therefore, we accept Jesus of Nazareth as our High Priest today, we must also accept the fact that the old law has been annulled to make room for Him as High Priest.

(Now the reader should realize here that you can't just change a part of the law. It is a complete document and must be accepted or rejected as a whole. You cannot just pick and choose which laws you wish to keep and which you don't like. Paul states: "Now I affirm to everyone who receives circumcision that he is under an obligation to practice the entire law" (Gal 5:3 FLNT). If you decide to keep one part of the law, you are obligated to keep all of it.

For example, if you think that you must keep the Sabbath as required by the law of Moses, then you also can't wear clothing with two different types of fabric woven together, such as "wool and linen" or cotton and polyester (Deut 22:11). Therefore, if you want Jesus as your High Priest, you cannot try to keep some or all of the laws and commandments associated with the Levitical priesthood at the same time.)

The writer of Hebrews strengthens his argument by emphasizing that the new covenant (contract) was made by God swearing an oath. The

law – the first covenant (contract) – did not involve God swearing an oath but the fact that He swore an oath shows the seriousness and importance of the second contract.

He also explains that the law of Moses needed to be annulled “because of its weakness and ineffectiveness.” We read: “For *in this pronouncement* there is an annulling of the previous commandment because of its weakness and ineffectiveness” (Heb 7:18 FLNT). He calls it “weak” and “ineffective” because it was unable to make anyone perfect (vs 19).

Paul helps us understand the reason the law is so weak. It is because it depends upon human efforts such as will power, determination, dedication, earnest desire, etc. Romans 8:3 reads: “For the law was ineffective, being weak because it *only worked* through *the efforts* of the flesh.” He continues by saying that God’s plan for sending His Son is: “...so that the ordinances of the law would be fulfilled in those who don’t conduct their lives following the flesh but following the Spirit” (Rm 8:4 FLNT).

The legislation which God wrote on stone was ineffective because it was subject to man’s efforts. Now God has sworn a solemn oath to do away with the old, ineffective covenant and bring in a new one. This covenant is being written on our hearts by the Holy Spirit. When we allow Him to do this in us, this is really effective!

You see, God’s plan is for us to really be made perfect. Someone who is truly walking in faith should express a righteousness which is superior to the law. Jesus proclaims: “For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter into the kingdom *which comes from the heavens*” (Mt 5:20 FLNT).

The scribes and Pharisees tried very hard to keep every bit of the law. In fact, their whole lives were devoted to this single objective. Yet God expects something more from us. He expects our lives to be so full of Himself that His righteousness is expressed in us and through us. God’s life within us is capable of revealing the entire character and personality of the Father, thus “fulfilling” the law.

Another argument which the writer of Hebrews puts forth is that the Old Covenant law, along with its rituals and sacrifices, doesn't satisfy God. This is important. Law-keeping does not satisfy the Father. However, the indwelling Christ of the New Covenant does. We read: "By first saying, 'Sacrifices and offerings don't satisfy your *true* intentions, neither do you take pleasure in them,' (which are *the things* offered according to the law) and then saying, 'Look, I have come to do your will,' he does away with the first in order to establish the second" (Heb 10:8,9 FLNT). Jesus does away with law in order to establish true righteousness in us through the agency of His own life.

A NEW WIND

Recently, a new kind of twist to the idea of "law-keeping" has come to my attention. It is that, although the Gentiles are not obligated to keep the law, the Jews who are converted are still under this obligation. At least one person has insisted that Peter and the other converted Jews still kept the law.

It is clear from reading the New Testament that not all the converted Jews had Paul's understanding – which he claimed had come directly from Jesus (Gal 1:12) – and that some of them continued to adhere to the law. Since this new idea has come to the fore, we will spend some time examining it in the light of the scriptures. To some degree this argument depends on insisting that Peter and other significant figures in Jerusalem continued to adhere to the law.

When examining this question, the first thing we can notice is that Paul claims that Peter did not "live like a Jew" which must mean that he was not religiously complying with all the norms and regulations of the law. Paul, while rebuking Peter for withdrawing and not eating with the Gentile believers anymore said: "If you, being a Jew, live as the Gentiles and not as the Jews..." (Gal 2:14 FLNT). What's this? Peter didn't live like a Jew but instead like a Gentile? Could this mean that to some degree he had stopped adhering strictly to the law?

Also, we read that when Peter and those Jews with him withdrew, they: "betrayed their convictions" or "acted in a hypocritical manner" (Gal 2:13). This can only mean that they had already formed genuine

convictions contrary to the law which forbade them to eat with Gentiles.

Logically, this conviction was that it was no longer necessary for them to keep the law. But when some others came along from "James," who were still bound by religious tradition, their upbringing and fear of men led them to betray what they really thought and to act hypocritically.

The next item we must consider is that in Jesus, "...there can be neither Jew nor Greek" (Gal 3:28). In other words, there are not two separate categories any longer. They have been made one.

We read: "For he is our peace, the One who made both *Jews and Gentiles* one, having broken down the partition barrier between them, having destroyed the *motive for* antagonism in his physical body *through his death*" (Eph 2:14 FLNT). And how did He do this? "...by deactivating the law made up of commandments and decrees so that he could create in himself from the two, one new "man," so making peace" (Eph 2:15 FLNT).

The word "deactivate" in this verse is KATAERGEIO in Greek and means according to Thayer:

- 1) to render idle, unemployed, inactivate, inoperative
 - 1a) to cause a person or thing to have no further efficiency
 - 1b) to deprive of force, influence, power
- 2) to cause to cease, put an end to, do away with, annul, abolish
 - 2a) to cease, to pass away, be done away
 - 2b) to be severed from, separated from, discharged from, loosed from any one
 - 2c) to terminate all intercourse with one

In light of these scriptures, it is impossible that there are still two categories of believers: one which is free to not keep the law and another which still must do so.

Although Paul received this revelation directly from the Lord, there seem to be other brothers who were involved in the life of the early church who lacked this revelation. One such brother who stands out is James.

This James was not one of the apostles. The “James” who was chosen by Jesus was killed early on in the history of the church. This other James was one of Jesus’ brothers who assumed a position of prominence among the believers after Jesus’ death and resurrection.

In many of the instances of different early believers reverting to practicing the law, we find this James behind it. For example, when Peter drew back and stopped eating with the Gentiles, it was because “...certain *brothers* had come from James...” (Gal 2:12). Please notice it doesn’t say that they came from Jerusalem, but from “James.”

When Paul and others came to Jerusalem to resolve the question of whether or not the Gentiles needed to keep the law, Peter seemed quite clear that they were not obligated. We read this account in Acts 15 where he recited for them what God had showed him about the Gentiles and how God had acted towards them concerning faith and salvation.

But then James stepped in. It seemed as if he just couldn’t stand it that the Gentiles could get off with no laws at all to keep. Therefore, he felt the need to create four “little” laws for them. He admits that it was his idea by saying: “Therefore, my judgment is...” (Acts 15:19 FLNT). Then he goes on to list his four “dogmas” (Gk).

It seems that Paul and the others went along with these little rules because it was not a heavy burden, being nowhere near as burdensome as trying to keep the whole law. So, they came to “unanimity” (Acts 15:25) and agreed with his suggestion. Later they said: “For it seemed to be good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden...” (Acts 15:28 FLNT).

But in saying this, they must have been merely indicating that they had peace about the question of not laying a heavy burden on the Gentiles. Nowhere does it say that God spoke to them directly or that it was He who ordered these four dogmas to be kept. The truth is it was James who invented these things and the others just went along with it.

Although these brothers imply that the Holy Spirit upheld them in this conclusion, there is some serious doubt that God initiated it. If you think about it, it cannot be true that God values these four little laws

above all the hundreds or even thousands of others contained in the Old Covenant. These include laws such as: not to murder, lie, commit adultery, rape, covet, steal, etc.

It is impossible that eating a strangled chicken, for example, which James sought to forbid is more evil in God's eyes, and therefore a more important law for the Gentile believers to keep, than these and many other extremely serious offenses. Is eating a strangled chicken worse than murder? Is it more offensive to God than adultery? Think about this a little.

There is no compelling logic to explain why the Gentiles should keep only these four rules and no others. James was correct when he said it was, "my judgment" (verse 19) that they should keep these four laws. Furthermore, three of these four "dogmas" seem to pertain to what we should or should not eat. Yet, Jesus taught that it is not what enters into our mouth which defiles us, but what comes out of it (Mk 7:15).

What we must conclude is that James, who seems to still have had a strong connection with the Jewish ceremonial law, suggested this; and since he seemed to be influential, and it was a light burden, the others went along with the compromise which gave them a sense of spiritual peace. Later however, Paul contradicts this admonition, at least concerning food sacrificed to idols (see 1 Cor 8:4-8).

To further investigate the influence of James with regard to the law, let us look at one of Paul's trips to Jerusalem. When Paul went to Jerusalem and was made a prisoner it seems that he did this against the guidance of God.

Why would someone think this? First, the Lord told him not to go. We read in Acts 21:4: "These disciples said to Paul through the Spirit that he should not go to Jerusalem." Numerous other prophets also told him of the many ruinous things which would happen to him there. Yet he persisted and went anyway. His motives for going are unclear, but it seems that even Paul had a few vestiges of the old religion left in him.

The catalyst for his being captured and imprisoned was his making a vow along with some other men and going to the temple. This was

suggested to him by the “elders” in Jerusalem among whom was James, who is the only one mentioned by name (Acts 21:18).

Here James is again, involved in suggesting a little law-keeping so that the local Jews wouldn't realize what Paul really thought and taught. Although the scriptures don't say specifically that it was James who suggested this, it is entirely possible and in keeping with his other activities.

This writer understands these actions of Paul of going to the temple and taking this vow to be a mistake. Besides the bad results of his actions, he was also participating in something which did not harmonize with his teachings. Besides all the numerous verses which we have just examined, he also taught us that we are the true temple (1 Cor 3:16).

Furthermore, he was waiting in the temple during a time of “purification” for an “offering” to be made for him and the others. This word “offering” can mean a bloodless oblation or a “sacrifice,” presumably involving blood.

Now why would Paul be waiting for such a thing? How could he possibly need any kind of oblation or sacrifice in the old temple, after entering into Jesus the Anointed One? What conceivable “purification” could have been accomplished by any kind of physical washing or abstinence which Jesus did not fulfill through His death and resurrection?

Paul and Peter both taught us that we are already “washed” and “purified” in Jesus (1 Cor 6:11, 1 Pet 1:22). Paul is clearly involved in a compromise here to accommodate and pacify other brethren by doing some activities which do not fit well with the rest of his teaching. The results of his compromise with something which was less than the truth, had disastrous results.

So we see that a little law-keeping was not blessed. Paul himself teaches us that: “A little yeast leavens the whole lump of dough (Gal 5:9 FLNT). The context of this verse is Paul teaching us that the law does not and cannot justify us. Therefore, it is clear from the context that the “little yeast” or “little leaven” means “a little lawkeeping.”

This is just what Paul did in Jerusalem which cost him his freedom. This writer suspects that this experience gave Paul an even clearer understanding regarding the law which is reflected in his later writings.

5.

A CAGE FULL OF BIRDS

In the book of Jeremiah we find an interesting passage. At first glance, it seems to transmit a very unique message that we don't seem to see in other parts of the scriptures. Let us take a look at this very striking passage to see what God has to say to us from it.

“For among my people are found wicked *men*; they lie in wait as one who sets snares; they set a trap; they catch men. As a cage is full of birds, so their houses are full of deceit [or “fill their ‘houses’ through deceit”]. Therefore they have become great and grown rich. They have grown fat, they are sleek; yes, they surpass {or, overlook} the deeds of the wicked; they do not plead the cause; the cause of the fatherless. Yet they prosper, and the right of the needy they do not defend. Shall I not punish *them* for these *things*?” (Jer 5:26-29 NKJV).

Here we find God speaking about something He considers “wicked.” It is an act of evil men. And what is this vile act? It is to catch men. It is to bait a trap in order to catch others in it. The goal of this “catching men” is to fill their “houses” with people.

But why would someone want to fill their “house” with other people? It could be that they enjoy lording it over and controlling others. It must be that they like the sensation of being an important person whom others look up to and admire. Their pride is elevated. Their ego is stroked. They have become “great.”

According to this verse, it also means that they are using these people to enrich themselves without considering the financial situation of those under their control from whom they get their money.

These men (and/or women) have found and developed ways to attract and hold followers. They have discovered devious means to impress others and bind them to themselves. In the Christian world today, this

could be accomplished through preaching certain doctrines and practices which seem to be right and which only that particular leader or group teaches.

The Jeremiah passage labels this activity as “deceit.” The followers of the above mentioned leaders have been deceived. They have been duped into accepting the program and beliefs of these leaders and so have been trapped by them for their personal gain.

These “leaders” have caught them and put them in their cages. Some translations of this verse say something like this: “As a cage is full of birds, so their houses are full [of followers] *through* deceit” (vs 27) instead of “*of* deceit.”

Now it is possible that Christians reading this verse may not fully understand the error of this kind of practice. Since it is very common today for men with some kind of “ministry” to use their gifts to attract followers and fill their “churches” with members, this practice has become generally accepted and is even thought to be good.

After all, people reason, didn’t Jesus tell his disciples He would make them “fishers of men” (Mt 4:19)? What could this mean if it doesn’t mean to catch and collect men?

The problem here is for whom are we collecting men? Is it for ourselves or for Jesus? Are we filling our “houses” or His? Although many confuse a “church building” or Christian organization with the “house of God” they are not the same thing.

You see, Jesus already has His “group.” It is called “the church.” He is the head of it and it is He who is building it. This group of people should never be divided. No part of it should ever fall under the control of someone other than Jesus or even alongside of Jesus.

Although our Lord’s “group” is divided by limitations of geography, practicality, etc. it was never meant to be divided into any smaller segments based upon different human leadership. It was meant to always be one church, one body. Anyone, therefore, who acts in a way which severs this body into smaller segments is acting contrary to His will.

Furthermore, His will is that this group be only His. It is meant to be under His direction only. His plan is that He would be the one and only “leader.” Anyone, therefore, who begins to dominate a small subgroup of believers and regard them as their own “church” or “work” begins to compete with Jesus as their leader.

Yet, the practice of “catching” men and then joining them into some kind of church group or other is very common today. This is done by many different people with various motives. This has produced numerous tragic results. When believers are separated off into smaller groups or “churches” with human leadership, they are invariably cut off, to a greater or lesser extent, from their true Head which is Jesus.

The insertion of any authority figure in the place of Jesus who is the Anointed One, limits and frustrates the ability of the believers under that person’s control to intimately know and follow their true Master.

This limitation is both very real and very harmful. We were made by God to be able to follow only one Master (Lk 16:13). Any other competing source of authority will only confuse and mislead the believer. Since human leaders are easier to see and hear, frequently people end up following them rather than our invisible Lord. Perhaps, because of the prevalence of this sort of activity today, many do not realize the damage which is being done, but it certainly exists and has a very negative impact.

When following human leadership, people inevitably begin to rely more and more on men and less upon God. When the guidance of the two leaders – God and the human leader – are divergent, the normal human tends to trust what is visible and audible rather than in God who is invisible. Slowly, their dependence upon man grows and their relationship with Jesus diminishes. This then negatively impacts their spiritual life and maturity.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

Let us now go on to look at the scriptures to see if there are any other verses which reinforce this important truth. We have already read one verse from the Old Testament in which God condemns catching men and using them for our own glory, benefit and profit. But are there any

other such verses in the Bible? Does the New Testament have any similar warnings? Surprisingly, it does. It has quite a few of them. Yet many of these verses seem to have been obscured in our present translations.

The common religious practices of the last centuries seem to have clouded the minds of many translators of the New Testament. The idea of catching men “for Christ” and forming them into groups under the direction of human leaders has been the norm for a long, long time. Therefore, many translators have approached their work with some preconceived ideas gained from their experience and observation of “Christianity” at work.

Although not all men who have followed this birdcage pattern have had selfish motives in what they have done (in fact, some no doubt have had a good heart and wanted to help others) human beings are easily corrupted. Some may have started well, but when prestige, human honor, fame and even money began to come their way, their purity of purpose can change. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for the human being who receives praise, honor and money from men to remain a humble servant.

It is also very difficult for someone who begins to receive money from some kind of organization or other to remain free of all dependence on that organization. Such dependence, over time, easily alters a person’s actions and thinking, especially when the salary is good.

One of the first New Testament passages which attracts our attention is found in the book of Acts chapter 20, verses 29-31. These words were spoken by Paul when he was saying last goodbyes to the brothers from Ephesus. He would never see them again and so was very concerned for their future welfare.

In this context he said: “I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise to distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them[selves]. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears [about such things]” (Acts 20:29-31 NIV).

Paul considered this kind of danger very real. The peril of a human being coming into God's "group" and leading members away for himself was very concrete. It was extremely important to him that the brothers would be aware of this evil activity and studiously avoid it. You may have noticed that these "wolves" distort God's truth. No doubt this is the same as the "deceit" about which Jeremiah spoke.

Here we see that there will be some, even Christians, who will act with selfish motives. They will use the scriptures, subtly altering them to attract, catch and keep followers. They want to have some "birds" in their own cage. In fact, the more the better. They want to have their own group or "church" where they are the big man, where they are the leader who others respect and follow.

But a true servant of God never has his own ambition and selfish motives in mind. His heart is to serve God alone. His goal is to gather people into the Lord's fold, not his.

Such a person is not looking for honor (see Jn 5:41 NKJV), fame or money. He never tries to get a group of his own followers. He has no desire to impress others. He doesn't seek anything for himself. As a servant in God's house, his motives and actions are all directed toward building up his Master's kingdom and advancing His glory. His desire is that Jesus be glorified in everything and that His "group" be built up.

In Colossians chapter 2, verse 8 we find another admonition from Paul concerning this very problem. We read: "See to it that no one takes you captive [for themselves] through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ" (NIV).

The Father's Life Version reads: "Be careful so that no one leads you away as plunder *for themselves* using philosophy and empty, deceptive ideas, which is the way men often operate, following the normal worldly pattern, *but* which is not the way of the Anointed One."

You see, this practice of trying to attract followers and build your own group is common. It is the "normal worldly pattern." It is "the way men often operate."

You can see it being practiced almost everywhere, in virtually every part of the world today among believers. In fact, it has now been accepted as “normal” or even as a desirable thing. But it is not the way of Jesus Christ. Don’t be put in someone else’s birdcage.

Once you are separated from God’s group by some man or men and put into a “sub-group” of believers, you have become their “plunder” or their “captive.” Now you are being used for their purposes, their glory and their profit. Of course, they try very hard to obscure and hide this fact with their words, teachings and reasonings.

They will use all their soulish mental and emotional power to persuade you that by putting yourself under their authority “you are in the right place.” You will be kept “safe.” But this is not the truth. Paul clearly shows us that this is just the way the world always works and always has worked. It is certainly not the way of God’s kingdom.

TAKING CAPTIVES

Although many have not realized it, the New Testament is actually full of such similar warnings. For example, in 2 Peter chapter 2:1,3 we read: “But there also arose false prophets among the people, just as among you too there will be false teachers who will craftily take others captive as their own followers, bringing ruin...” “And in their greediness for money, using carefully crafted words, they will use you for their personal gain...” (FLNT).

This phrase “take others captive” is often translated in other versions, “introduce destructive heresies.” However, the Greek word here, HAIRESIS, has a much deeper meaning than just “heresy” or “division.”

Thayer, a leading authority on the meaning of ancient Greek words, as his first definition of this word: the “act of taking, capture: e.g. storming a city.”

Of course, when you take and capture men for yourself, you do create a sect, division or “heresy.” But it seems that the thrust of the meaning here is not merely introducing a false doctrine or even a division into

the house of God, but using a false or distorted teaching to capture people for your sect. It is the “act of taking, *or* capture.”

This, according to 1 Peter 2:1, not only brings division but also “ruin.” It harms those people who are so caught and caged. This practice damages people in several different ways.

When people begin to look to and depend upon another man, they inescapably turn away from looking to and depending upon Jesus. This is an unfortunate fact. It is a very serious error and results in much spiritual loss and damage for those involved. Their intimacy with God fades as their dependence on man grows.

Also, when people find themselves in someone’s cage, they are isolated, to a greater or lesser extent, from the rest of the body of Christ and the ministry which they can find there. Furthermore, as clearly stated by the scriptures, these groups of caged men and women are formed through distortions of the truth. Therefore, these people who are believing and following such distortions end up in darkness and do not grow spiritually as they should.

Peter makes a strong statement concerning people who act in this way. He says: “Their judgment, even though delayed, has not been cancelled and their destruction will not be postponed” (2 Pet 2:3 FLNT).

Another verse which repeats this same warning is found in 2 Corinthians 4:2. There Paul says: “But we have renounced the hidden, shameful things *and* do not walk in dishonest conduct or use the word of God to snare followers...” (FLNT).

The New King James Version translates the phrase “use the word of God to snare followers” as “...handling the word of God deceitfully...” But this translation does not so clearly condemn the practice about which we have been speaking.

Could it be that many translators have been so blinded by our present church situation which is divided up into many segments, many with their own “heads” or leaders, that they failed to correctly transmit the substance of this verse?

The Greek word here is DOLOO which primarily means according to Thayer and Strong, “to ensnare.” This means to catch in a trap. Only by implication does it mean “to adulterate” or “corrupt” which would lead to the translation: “handling the word of God deceitfully.”

Of course we have seen that those who are trying to ensnare or capture others do use the truth deceitfully. But the point of this verse is not merely about misuse of God’s truth but about *why* these individuals misuse it. They do so in order to “snare” and catch men and women for their own purposes. They do so to form and enlarge their own group of followers – to fill up their cages.

These people have other motives for what they are doing besides the glory of Christ. Such motives are often hidden from others and even from themselves since they are not beautiful. Such things as pride, ambition, competition with others, the desire for power, for fame, or for money, are often at the root of such activities.

Those who dominate others and form them into their own groups or “churches” are in search of just such fallen, fleshly things. They want to be rich. They want others to notice them. They wish to be seen and heard. They want to demonstrate powerfully and frequently their personal revelation, gifts and “ministries.” They are seeking to get a lot of personal benefit out of their “work for God.”

WHO WAS THE FIRST ONE?

Perhaps we should stop a minute and consider something here. Who was the first one to use the intelligence, “gifts,” abilities, good looks, spiritual power, etc. which God had given him to attract to himself and hold a group of followers?

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Of course it was Lucifer whom we now know as Satan. This fact should reveal to us the source of such activity which still goes on today.

Paul recognized such human tendencies for what they were. So he said in Romans chapter 16, verses 17,18: “Now I plead with you, brethren, be wary of those who are creating divisions and trying to trap others *for*

their own groups which is contrary to the teaching you learned, and turn away from them. For such people do not serve our Lord, the Anointed One, but their own selfish ambitions, and through their plausible arguments and slick swords they deceive the hearts of the gullible” (FLNT).

Here Paul is again repeating this same warning. Obviously, this is something which was a common problem and danger for the believers of his day just as it is on ours.

The Greek word rendered here as: “to trap others” has been translated in other versions as “offenses” and “obstacles” which does not transmit such a clear warning. But the Greek word used here is: SKANDALON, which, according to Strong, means: “a trap-stick (bent sapling), i.e. snare.” Thayer translates it in this way: “1) the movable stick or trigger of a trap, a trap stick 1a) a trap, snare.”

Although this word can also mean by implication, “impediment” or “cause for error,” the principal, clearest meaning is the trigger of a trap. This is exactly what Paul is trying to warn the disciples about. His concern is about ambitious people cleverly using the scriptures to trap others, persuading them to follow and cling to them.

They want to trap them for their private cages. They want to catch them for their “churches” or groups. They want more members. They want their group to grow. This is because only through this kind of “growth” can they be seen as successful and have others respect and admire them. Such a danger is so real and the negative results for believers so dangerous that Paul is actually “pleading” with the disciples to be aware of this situation and studiously avoid it.

Still another passage in which God again warns us about this evil is found in Jude, chapter 1, verse 17-19. Here we read: “But you, beloved, remember the words which have been spoken before by the sent ones of our Lord Jesus the Anointed One. They explained to you that in the last time there will be deceivers following their own ungodly, unclean sexual desires. These are those who separate off *their own groups of followers, who are being guided by the soul* and are not following the Spirit” (FLNT).

Paul repeats this warning in 2 Timothy 3:13 where he advises us: “But evil men – specifically those who bring others under their spell – will just get worse and worse, *both* deceiving others and being deceived themselves” (FLNT). Once again, the thrust of this verse is not very clearly transmitted by many versions which use words such as “impostors” in the place of “those who bring others under their spell.”

The actual Greek word here, GOES, means: “one who howls out enchantments, a sorcerer, enchanter.” Strong defines it as: “properly, a wizard (as muttering spells).” Although this word can mean “a deceiver” or “impostor” this meaning is only by implication and is not the principal, clearest meaning of the word.

You see, this danger is not just something from the Old Testament. It is here present with us today. There are many men and women who are using their powers to enchant others, bringing them under their spell, and so draw them under their authority and into their own group. God calls this kind of thing “evil.”

In Colossians 2:18,19 we encounter a somewhat confusing passage. The New King James Version renders it like this: “Let no one defraud you of your reward, taking delight in *false* humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the Head...”

Here we have described for us what seems to be a very rare bird. It seems to be someone who is falsely humble, worships angels and has a big, puffed up imagination. In more than 40 years of following Jesus, I have run into very few of such “creatures.” It seems strange that Paul would devote his writing to this kind of person.

This passage is very difficult to translate and understand. But I would like to submit another possible translation for your consideration. In The Father’s Life New Testament we read: “Don’t let anyone cheat you out of your reward by insisting on voluntary submission *to men* and giving reverence to *human* messengers. *Such men* emphasize things which they claim to have ‘seen’ without any genuine basis whatsoever and have a overinflated, fleshly idea of their own importance. When

you reverence and submit to them, you are not holding securely to the Head...”

When we look at the Greek word translated in the NKJV as “humility” we find that it is a compound word composed of two other words. One of these words means “the mind or intellect” the other can be translated “deferring servilely to others.”

This then could be referring to what many in today’s church call “submission” to a man or group of men. Such submission is really an attitude of the mind as this compound Greek word indicates and does not often include the physical act of worship such as bowing down before someone. It means that someone assumes the attitude of being “submissive” to someone else. (By the way, the word in the NKJV “false” as in “false humility” does not appear in the Greek text.)

In the phrase “worship of angels” we find that the Greek word “angels” means “a messenger” or “envoy.” While this can refer to angels in the New Testament, there is also the possibility of it referring to men who are, or claim to be, sent by God.

Now, such a puffed up, fleshly person who claims to have revelation from God and wants you to humble yourself before or “submit to” him is not a rare bird at all. Today, God’s people have a great number of such self-important people among them.

But Paul shows us here that if we “reverence” them, by submitting to them, we are running the risk of being cheated out of our reward (vs 18). When we submit ourselves to men we, at the same time, take our eyes off of Jesus. No man can ever work to transform our lives as He can. No amount of obeying man will do this work. Such obedience can only work to alter our outward behavior, but cannot change our heart. Only Jesus can do that.

Therefore, this interruption of our personal, intimate fellowship with Jesus together with complete reliance upon Him, retards our spiritual development. It curtails our transformation into His image, which only takes place as we are seeing and reflecting His glory (2 Cor 3:18).

This then will result in a diminishing of our eternal reward when He comes. Since we all have only a limited amount of time in our lives, we should use this time to gain as much of Jesus as we can and not waste it following men.

Many believers are sincere. They want to do the right thing. But many are also very innocent, sort of like sheep. Therefore, when someone who seems to be impressive comes along claiming to have a revelation from God and begins to dominate them, many are easily led off captive. They are easy to deceive and manipulate.

Paul confirms the truth of such a vulnerability of believers when he writes: “For you put up with someone if he brings you into bondage *to himself*, if he takes *your money*, if he takes advantage of you, if he exalts himself, or *even* if he strikes you on the face! I say this in disgust...” (2 Cor 11:20,21 FLNT).

Please notice how this passage seems to repeat, in a condensed form, what all the other verses we have examined are saying. Such persons who are in search of personal fame and influence do several things. They bring God’s people into bondage, take their money, take advantage of them by using their time and energies to build up their own personal kingdoms and exalt themselves. This is truly a slap in the face! Yet how many of God’s children today tolerate and even advocate such things!

One of the principal deceitful arguments which men use to catch and hold others in their cages is that they are doing this for the benefit of those whom they have caught. They are being “helpful” to them.

Perhaps they are protecting them from some imagined danger of false doctrine or other error. Possibly they are instructing them in some special belief system or practice that others don’t “understand” since they are not as enlightened as that particular leader. The deceitfulness of such leaders is to make the “members” believe that it is they themselves who are being benefitted instead of the leader(s) of the group.

Yet Jesus taught us: “The kings of the Gentiles have dominion over them and those exercising authority over them are called ‘Benefactors.’”

But you may not do so! Instead, he who is 'great' among you, let him become as a newborn child and he who is an outstanding example in the spiritual life, let him be as a servant" (Lk 22:25,26 FLNT).

You see, those who are claiming to be leaders say that they are "benefactors" or, in other words, doing something beneficial for the people under their control. But this has been prohibited by Jesus. For one believer to have dominion – any kind of dominion – over another believer has been strictly prohibited by our Lord.

He is to be the one and only Leader. He is our true Master, Head and King. Anyone else who rises up to dominate a smaller group of believers is entering into competition with Jesus Himself.

This is a work which God labels as "evil." It divides His body. This kind of human domination stifles the intimacy with Jesus of believers and so retards their spiritual development. Jesus is both able and willing to lead all of His people.

Interestingly, John in his epistles warns us constantly of something he calls "antichrist." This word is composed of two Greek words "ANTI" and "CHRISTOS." Of course CHRISTOS means "the Anointed One" or Christ.

In English the word "anti" principally means "against," so we would normally think of an antichrist as someone who is against Christ. But in ancient Greek, the word "anti" has another prominent and important meaning. It means "instead of," "substitution for" or "in the place of."

This then would mean that anyone who is taking the place of or substituting for Christ in the lives of believers must be considered an antichrist. This definition fits well with the activities which we have been investigating.

MONEY

It is true that in many places in the scriptures we are admonished to financially support those who are doing the work of God. Yet this is very different from financing those who are doing their own work but using God's name. There are many who are using the scriptures along

with their personal gifts, charisma, etc. to support themselves and even get rich. Sadly, today there are leaders of groups of believers who are not only practicing this error, but advocating it as if it were something from God.

Yet the example of the Bible is something entirely different. Paul explains his actions like this: “For we are not like so many others, turning the word of God into a money-making business. But instead, having no ulterior motives, we speak from God in the Anointed One – *God himself* being our witness” (2 Cor 2:17 FLNT).

Thayer defines the Greek word KAPELEUO, which here is rendered “a money-making business,” as: 1) to be a retailer, to peddle to make money by selling anything; 2a) to get sordid gain by dealing in anything, to do a thing for base gain.

But Paul had another attitude. His “ministry” was not for himself, but was used to serve others. His support did not come from his manipulation of others, but from God. He did not look to men for his financial needs, but to the Lord Jesus alone.

He was careful to do everything honestly and from a pure heart, being completely transparent before men and God Himself. He was not looking to become rich or famous, but only to please his Master.

In fact, Paul had a very stern, negative attitude towards those who tried to use the good news as a means of support. In 2 Corinthians chapter 11 he explains why he did not take money from the Corinthians while he was there among them. He says he “...proclaimed the good news of God to [them] free of charge” (vs 7). He explains that “In everything I kept myself from being a *financial* burden to you...” (vs 9).

And why did he do this? Why did he act in this way? He did it to expose and stop those who were abusing others financially, pretending to be “servants of God” while feathering their own nest with the believer’s money. These were men who were using God’s work to enrich themselves.

In 2 Corinthians 11, verses 12-15 we read: “But what I do, I will continue to do, so that I may cut off the opportunity of those whose purpose is to

get resources {raise money} *for their "ministries,"* boasting that they are supported in the same way we are. For such men [those who seek money from men] are false sent ones who work deceitfully, transforming themselves into sent ones of the Anointed One. And it is no wonder, for even Satan transforms himself into an angel of light. It is no great thing, therefore, if his servants also transform themselves into 'ministers of righteousness' whose end will be according to their works" (FLNT).

The Greek word translated above "whose purpose is to get resources {raise money}" is APHORME which, according to Thayer can be translated "the resources we avail ourselves of in attempting or performing anything." The phrase: "that they are supported" is from the word HEURISKO which can mean, according to Thayer, "to acquire, get, obtain, procure."

The Father's Life Version has a footnote about this passage which I will include here: "It is true that believers are taught to financially support those who do God's work. However, such workers must NEVER look to men for their needs but only to God. If and when such men begin to urge, pressure, and beg other men to support them, they have left the will of God. They have begun to walk in the flesh using earthly techniques.

"When God sends someone, he supplies all their needs from his abundant riches. When men send themselves to 'work for God,' being led by their own pride, ambition, etc., then they must manipulate others for their support. Paul's assessment of such 'workers' is very harsh yet true. Such fleshly, human efforts are, at their roots, Satanic."

So we see that every believer is faced with certain traps. He or she is in danger of being caught by some leader or other and put in their personal group. They are in danger of being used by unscrupulous leaders who gain fame, status and wealth from the "birds" in their cages.

However, our Lord has already warned us about this peril. He has given us many scriptures to help us avoid such a consequence. We will all do well to obey Him.

The purpose of this writing is not to discourage Christians from reaching out to others and then trying to help them grow up into Christ. We should all be involved daily in this work. Yet our job is to make disciples for Christ, not for ourselves or our “church group.” Our gifts and ministries should be dedicated to serving others and not ourselves.

Our financial supply and, in fact, all our supply must come from heaven and not from men. We must learn to rely on God and Him alone.

It is important for all of us to walk in the light. We should understand what we are doing and why we are doing it. We should be careful to do our work for God in His way so that our works will pass all future tests. We must also be aware of what others are doing and be able to discern if what they are doing is purely for God or involves some selfish motives. This is a topic of which it is important for all Christians to be aware.

6.

ELDERS AND DEACONS

When we read in the New Testament about “elders” we should realize that this was not a new thing for the Jewish/Christian community. In fact, the concept of elders is really an Old Testament phenomenon. All the cities and villages of the Jews in the Old Testament had elders.

So then, who were these men? What was their role in society? How did they come to be “elders?” These are questions which are important for us to answer if we are to correctly understand the origin and function of this tradition which was carried over into the New Testament.

First of all we must realize one essential thing about the elders in the Old Testament. They were old. That’s right. There was never any such thing as a 20 year old “elder.” This would be a contradiction of

meaning. You no doubt already know the meaning of the word “elder.” It means old.

This age factor in someone who is considered an elder is essential because it speaks of experience. One thing people acquire by living for many years is experience. This comes from having years of contact and interaction with different kinds of people who act and react in a great variety of ways. This experience includes dealing with various situations, many diverse individuals and the numerous questions which arise in their lives. There is absolutely no substitute for this longterm experience!

The elders of the Old Testament were men who were known for their character. Since many towns and villages in those days were small, these men were known by practically everyone. These men were known from their youth. The inhabitants of that community knew their parents, they knew about their upbringing and their conduct from a young age; they knew their wife, their children, and their behavior throughout their lives.

When these men were honest, faithful, wise, dependable, just, and were not vulnerable to corruption with bribes, favors, etc., then the population of that town began to look to these men when they needed to decide certain questions.

When certain financial or social issues arose, they would get these elders together to decide what was just and good in any given situation, who was in the right and who was in the wrong. In short, they functioned somewhat like the judges of the Old Testament.

For example, let us suppose that a citizen entered into an agreement with someone else about the purchase of some land. Perhaps one of the two parties did not fulfill their part of the contract. Then the two parties would summon the elders together to hear both sides of the question and try to fairly and justly decide the issue. No doubt, their understanding of the Law of God would enter into their deliberations.

You see, in the days before the kings, there were no court systems in Israel. There was no local or national government. God had instituted a

theocracy, a government which was accomplished by God ruling directly over His people.

So when the populace needed guidance and or some kind of judicial decision, they sought out the elders. Although the judges were also available, they seem to have been few in number (only one was alive at any one time) and could not have been available for every little question. Since access to the judges was limited by distance and time, it was the elders of each town and village who were looked to decide any number of questions.

An example of such a thing is found in the book of Ruth, where we find Boaz calling a few of the elders together to be witnesses between himself and a relative concerning the inheritance belonging to Elimelech. These men were called to be witnesses that everything was being done correctly, transparently and according to the law of Moses. In this case, they did not make any decisions, but were called as faithful witnesses.

Please notice here that the elders of the Old Testament did not organize anything. They did not “run the city.” They did no central planning, they did not raise or receive any taxes, organize schools or the local infrastructure or control anyone’s life. Their role seems to be much more passive than active. They were available to serve the populace but did not dominate or orchestrate the lives of the others.

Also notice that these men were not elected. They were not chosen, appointed, “ordained,” or officially placed as elders. They were elders simply because of their life and experience. The community naturally and automatically recognized them because of their virtues, experience and wisdom. They had no special titles, salaries, positions of authority, fancy uniforms to make them stand out or any other such worldly trappings. They simply were who they were.

THE NEW TESTAMENT TRADITION

This “tradition” of elders was continued in the New Testament, except here these men were not known to the secular communities but to the spiritual communities – the churches, or the “gatherings of the called-

out ones.” Their function had much more to do with spiritual things than with earthly decisions.

This tradition was not, as far as we know, something instituted by the Lord through His teaching. It seems that He made no mention of it to His disciples. Yet it appears that the early brothers continued this Old Testament practice.

It is important to understand that the function of elders in the New Testament is essentially the same as that of the Old. There are very many similarities and parallels between these two “groups” of elders. However, there are a few aspects of this spiritual service which required different treatment.

It seems that in the New Testament times, the cities where the churches first took root were much larger than the Old Testament towns and villages. Therefore, most of the inhabitants were unknown to each other. Consequently, the converts to Christ did not have the advantage of knowing the lives and histories of the others. They and their families had not lived in close proximity for most, if not all, of their lives.

In those days, there were many new converts. Since many of these new believers did not know all the other members of the body of Christ, they could not know to whom to look for guidance and counsel. Therefore, Paul thought it was necessary for these “elders” to be pointed out so that the new believers could recognize them.

Of course, those with some spiritual growth would be able to discern such mature individuals. They could spiritually recognize those who were being used by God to give godly counsel and advice. Such more mature believers would have no need for someone to point out such “elders” – those whose lives exhibited the character and wisdom of Christ.

But the numerous new believers would not have such discernment. They would have no history of knowing the others’ lives since they were thrust together, not by physical proximity and living together for many years, but by coming to know Jesus. Being young Christians, they would not have the spiritual sensitivity to recognize those who were more mature.

Since young converts are easily impressed and misled by ambitious, gifted individuals, they could readily be misled, not being able to recognize those with the age, experience and spiritual maturity which God could use to give counsel and advice.

No doubt it was for this reason that Paul sensed a need for those men who were full of wisdom, experience and maturity to be “pointed out” so that the other believers could know who they were or “recognize” them. This was for the benefit of the larger group. Anyone who wanted counsel, help or wise instruction, needed to know where to go. They needed to know who was trustworthy, in intimate communion with God and able to direct them in His ways.

This is just what we read about in the book of Acts. In Acts 14:23 we read: “And when they [Paul and Bar-Nabas] had pointed out for them the older, more spiritually mature brothers in every gathering of the called-out ones and had prayed with fasting, they entrusted them to the Lord on whom they had believed” (FLNT).

This word translated “pointed out” in Greek is CHEIROTONEO. This literally means “to stretch out the hand” and so can be translated “to point out.” W. E. VINE in his *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* says the following about this Greek word: “Not a formal ecclesiastical ordination is in view, but the ‘appointment,’ for the recognition of the churches, of those who had already been raised up and qualified by the Holy Spirit, and had given evidence of this in their life and service.”

Of course in the city of Jerusalem, there was no need for anyone to point out those who had walked with Jesus personally. They were well known. But in the other cities, things were not so obvious.

As with the Old Testament, so with the New, the elders of the churches were never elected. Furthermore, contrary to what some translations of the scriptures seem to say, they were not chosen or “ordained.” They were simply pointed out.

THE PROOF OF SPIRITUAL MATURITY

To be an “elder” requires maturity – both physical and spiritual maturity. It requires the development of godly character along with a large dose of wisdom and experience. These qualities can only come with age and intimacy with Jesus. The “proof” of such characteristics is seen through the lives and families of such men.

In 1 Timothy 3:1-6 Paul gives us a list of virtues which demonstrate that someone could be considered an elder, or “watchman” as it is translated in this passage.

We read: “This saying is true: ‘If a man wishes to serve as a watchman, he desires *to do* a valuable service.’ The watchman, therefore, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, not a heavy drinker, self-controlled, exhibiting good behavior, given to hospitality, able to teach, peaceable, not quick to strike someone else [including his wife], but gentle, not someone who likes to argue, not someone greedy for money, someone who administers his own household well and has children who are obedient and who respect him (for if a man doesn’t know how to administer his own household, how can he care for the called-out ones of God?), not a young person or recent convert so that he doesn’t begin to think highly of himself and so fall into judgment, just as the devil did” (FLNT).

These qualities cannot be gained through appointment. They are not automatically given to someone because they were elected or chosen to serve in this way. A person’s life can only be governed by and saturated with such virtues through a life of intimacy with, and submission to, God. Such a life cannot be and, in fact, never is the result of any religious appointment, but is the fruit of the life of Jesus growing up in that person.

In his letter to Titus, chapter 1:5-9, Paul includes a similar list. “I left you in Crete to do this favor for me: that you would additionally correct the things that were lacking and point out the older, more *spiritually* mature brothers in every city, as I instructed you. *Such men are ones who are blameless, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, men who are not accused of behaving like the unsaved or of being disobedient to God.*”

“For the watchman must be blameless as God’s steward; not self-willed, not quick to get angry, not quarrelsome, not someone who strikes others [including his wife], not greedy for money; but given to hospitality, a promoter of virtue, discrete, just, holy, self-controlled; holding faithfully to the word which is according to the *correct* teaching, so that he may be able to encourage others by teaching, and to reprove those who contradict *the truth*” (FLNT).

From these verses, clearly indicating men of spiritual maturity and experience, we can understand Paul’s heart. He was very concerned for the well-being of the new converts. His heart yearned for the brothers and sisters to be able to grow up in Christ and attain all that God had for them.

To aid in this process, he thought it necessary for the brothers with wisdom and maturity to be pointed out to them. In this way, they could know to whom to look for advice and know whose lives were godly examples for them to follow.

Here the word translated “pointed out” actually means “to set down” or “to place.” Perhaps here Paul was again remembering the Old Testament pattern. Since the elders of the Old Testament were actually old, it seems that they often did not work much anymore or not employed full-time. They had lived most their life and were, to a greater or lesser extent, “retired.”

Since they were not occupied with full-time work, their habit was to gather at the gate of their city where there was a place for them to sit. From this vantage point, they could observe the lives of the inhabitants, converse with each other, and be available for those who wished to seek their counsel.

Here I am providing some verses which demonstrate that this “sitting at the gate of the city” was indeed the habit of these elders. “...then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city, to the gate of his city” (Deut 21:19 NKJV). “...then the father and mother of the young woman shall take and bring out the evidence of the young woman’s virginity to the elders of the city at the gate” (Deut 22:15 NKJV). “But if the man does not want to take his

brother's wife, then let his brother's wife go up to the gate to the elders..." (Deut 25:7 NKJV).

"And when he flees to one of those cities, and stands at the entrance of the gate of the city, and declares his case in the hearing of the elders of that city..." (Josh 20:4 NKJV). "And all the people who were at the gate, and the elders, said, 'We are witnesses. The Lord make the woman who is coming to your house like Rachel and Leah, the two who built the house of Israel; and may you prosper in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem'" (Ruth 4:11 NKJV). "The elders have ceased *gathering at* the gate, and the young men from their music" (Lam 5:14 NKJV).

Through these verses we see that the sitting place by the gate was the elder's "place." So, when Paul tells Timothy to "place" elders, he was likely referring to this habit of the Old Testament elders.

This then was another example of how Paul thought it necessary to indicate to the new believers of the early churches which men had been raised up by God, demonstrating through their godly character, wisdom and experience that they were reliable individuals from whom others could receive advice and counsel.

HOW ELDERS FUNCTION

We have spoken already about the role of elders in giving counsel and advice. But the scriptures indicate that there were other functions of these men also. In the verse we already quoted from 1 Timothy 3, these men are called "watchmen." The Greek word here is EPISKOPES which means "to watch over" or to function as a "watchman."

What do these watchmen do? They observe, they watch. Similarly to the elders of the Old Testament who sat at the gate and observed the conduct and daily lives of the inhabitants, the New Testament watchman is an observer.

Since these men have spiritual maturity, they also have the normal desire of a mature person to care for the younger ones. When they notice that someone is getting into trouble – for example, that they were heading in a dangerous direction or that they were about to make a serious mistake – then they have a responsibility before God to speak to

that person. A watchman is someone who watches over some property for someone else or even a city and warns the inhabitants of impending trouble.

This then is another function of a New Testament elder. He watches over the property of Jesus. He takes care of those who belong to God. He cares for them by giving them godly counsel and advice. He teaches them what he has learned about spiritual things. He warns them when they are in danger. He loves them as his own children because he knows they are loved by the Father, just as he himself is.

Although the New Testament watchmen have the responsibility to speak to someone who is erring or in danger, they have no right to try to enforce what they say. They have no authority to try to force anyone else to follow their advice or direction.

AUTHORITY OVER OTHERS PROHIBITED

The New Testament elders were not and are never given “authority” from God over other believers. This is a mistaken idea which many Christians have. Jesus never gave authority to His disciples over each other. In fact, Jesus prohibited such authority! He actually forbade His disciples to exercise any authority over the others.

Although this may come as a surprise to you, His teaching about this subject is very clear. Let us read together from Matthew 20:25-28: “But Jesus called them to him and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their great ones exercise authority over them. It must never be like this among you! But whoever wants to become great among you will be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you will be your slave. In the same way, the Son of man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many’” (FLNT).

In Luke 22:25,26 Jesus further clarifies this teaching. “So he said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles have dominion over them and those exercising authority over them are called “Benefactors.” But you may not do so! Instead, he who is “great” among you, let him become as a newborn child and he who is an outstanding example *in the spiritual life*, let him be as a servant’” (FLNT).

Here Jesus uses the word “benefactor.” A benefactor is someone who does something for your benefit. What they are doing is good for you. Yet, here Jesus teaches us that even when it seems beneficial for one believer to exercise authority over another believer, it is prohibited. It is not His way. Therefore, it is not permitted for any elder or watchman to exercise authority over someone else.

Shortly before Jesus’ ascension into heaven He stated: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Mt 28:18). Wow! This must really mean “all” since besides heaven and earth we don’t know of any other location. What He didn’t say was that He was parcelling out a little bit of this authority to each of us to use in His absence. Reading through to the end of this passage, we see that He hasn’t needed to give us any of this authority because He is not “absent.” He is still with us. The Authority Himself is with us until the consummation of the age (Mt 28:20).

Although Jesus did give His followers authority over the demons, He did not give any to us to use on our brothers and sisters. Setting aside the question of positional, secular and governmental authorities on this earth which is indeed delegated by God, among His people He is the sole authority. He has reserved this authority for Himself.

Some New Testament translations use the word “authority” in the case of Paul in 2 Corinthians 10:8 where we read: “For even if I should boast somewhat more about our authority, which the Lord gave us...” (NKJV), as if he had been given some authority himself. However, this translation cannot be correct since it contradicts the clear teachings of Jesus. This word translated “authority” can be and, no doubt should be, better translated as “capacity” or “ability” to harmonize better with what Jesus clearly taught. Paul therefore was given “capacity” or “ability” but not “authority.”

Therefore, although the watchman has a responsibility to speak when God needs him to warn someone who is erring, he has no authority, either in himself or from God, to try to force that person to do what he has said.

SHEPHERDS

Another word which we find used in the New Testament as a task for those who are carrying out the obligations of mature brothers is to “shepherd.” The Greek word used here is POIMEN which signifies a herdsman. What does this mean to us in the Christian context?

A shepherd of that time in history led his sheep. That meant he walked in front of them. They followed him because they knew him and trusted him. They had experience of his care and faithfulness toward them.

These shepherds never drove their sheep. Driving sheep is difficult without the aid of dogs, but leading them is easy if they are familiar with the shepherd. For example, Jesus said: “My sheep hear {or know} my voice, I know them, and they follow me” (Jn 10:27). Speaking about the “Good Shepherd” He says: “...he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When his sheep leave the fold, he *leads them by* going out in front of *them*. And the sheep follow him because they recognize his voice” (Jn 10:3,4 FLNT).

This is the way Jesus leads us. He never forces us to do something. He never pushes or shoves. He never demands that we do something which is against our will. He does not have to use “dogs” to drive us, which in this case would be human authority figures. In fact, He never violates our will in any way. Since it was God who gave us free will, He never, ever does anything which would violate it.

In the same way, leadership in the New Testament is never by the use of positional authority, but instead by example. Leadership is never exercised by force, coercion, demand or insistence. It is a “leadership” which has no control or authority over others. Instead, it is the example seen in the life of the “leaders” as they walk out in front of the others in the spiritual walk.

In fact, the Greek word which is translated as “over you” in 1 Thessalonians 5:12 is PROISTEMI which means, according to W. E. Vine in his Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words: “literally, ‘to stand before’ hence, ‘to lead, attend to’ (indicating care and diligence).” Another word translated “rule over you” in Hebrews 13:7 referring to elders is HEGEOMAI which, according to Strong’s definitions, means “to go before, lead the way.”

Paul, one of those who had the most profound revelations concerning Jesus' body, confirms this when he says: "Not that we have any dominion over your faith, but we are helpers of your joy. For you stand by faith *yourselves*" (2 Cor 1:24 FLNT).

Confirming this Peter says: "The older, *spiritually* mature brothers among you I exhort ...care for the flock of God which is among you, looking after them not because you have to, but willingly. Don't *do this* as a way to make money but with a good attitude, not by exercising *any* control over the others but by becoming examples to the flock" (1 Pet 5:1-3 FLNT).

As mentioned before, another important function of such an elder is to lead the others to good pastures and clean water. Since a truly spiritually mature brother is walking in intimacy with Jesus, he knows where such good nutrition and drink is. It is in God. So he leads the others into an ever increasing relationship with Jesus so that they can eat and drink of Him too.

NOT ORGANIZERS

Just as in the Old Testament, so in the New, the elders were never responsible for organizing the life of the believers. They were not programming church meetings. They did not schedule times for prayer or teaching. They were not responsible for orchestrating the various activities of the brothers and sisters.

Now this may come as a surprise to some readers. In today's "churches," the elders, or the pastor, does all of these things. He is the one in charge of running the church. But in the New Testament, we don't find even one example of such organizing on the part of the elders. That's right. We cannot find one verse in the New Testament which shows the apostles, "pastors," or elders organizing the activities of the brethren. It seems they scheduled nothing.

This should be very instructive for us. Many Christians claim to be "Bible believing" or to be following the scriptures. Yet most Christian groups are organized and run by a man or group of men. However, this has no biblical basis. It is an activity which has no scripture to support

it. Although it is a most common and universally accepted practice, it does not seem to be scriptural.

For example, we see that in the book of Acts the believers were meeting “from house to house.” Who was organizing this? Was it Peter saying, “On Mondays, this group will meet at John’s house and on Tuesday, this other group will meet at Stephen’s house.”

Do we read about James (or anyone else for that matter) dictating that on Thursday there will be meetings for fasting and prayer? No. No such thing was ever decided, orchestrated or programmed by the apostles. Instead, these things were led by the Holy Spirit.

You see, God has a different plan. He has a new idea for how to govern His people. It is called a “theocracy.” It is the government of God Himself. His plan is that Jesus would organize, schedule and “run” the church. In contrast to the unbiblical idea of humans running things, this teaching about Jesus being the organizer is very clear in the scriptures.

We read: “...Christ is the head of the church” (Eph 5:23 NKJV). Also we are taught: “And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence” (Col 1:18 NKJV). Furthermore we see that God the Father “...gave Him to be head over all *things* to the church” (Eph 1:22 NKJV).

What does being the “head” mean? This word is used to describe something similar to a human body. In our body, our head runs everything. All our words, decisions, movements, etc. are governed by our head. No other member of our body is ever qualified to direct this complex organism. Although certain members, such as nerves, may transmit directions from the head, it is always our head which controls everything.

In the same way Jesus is meant to be the head of His body which is called “the church.” He is the one whom the Father has put in charge of EVERYTHING. No one else is capable of or called to run anything. Did you notice that He is the head over “all things?” (Eph 1:22). Nothing was left out for man to take care of. When Jesus is directing every

movement of His people, they move in a glorious harmony, accomplishing His will.

Yet it seems that men have a problem here. How could Jesus possibly “run the church?” He’s invisible. He doesn’t speak audibly (very often) or send emails. He’s not on “WhatsApp” or Twitter. How then could He possibly organize and direct all the activities of His church.

Here we encounter one of the greatest deficiencies of today’s church. Very few believers are intimate with Jesus. Very few know Him well and therefore know how to follow Him. In spite of the verses which we already cited about His sheep knowing His voice and being able to follow Him, very few today have this experience. Since they have very little spiritual growth because of little intimacy with Jesus, they are unable to follow His leadership in a great variety of situations. Therefore, they begin to rely on men.

Since they don’t know how to hear from, trust in and follow an invisible Lord, they take the easy way out and look to human leadership. They put men in the place of God and let them run things. Instead of recognizing their lack of intimacy with Jesus and doing what is necessary to fix this serious problem, they hide the problem by substituting men in the place of their Lord. Since almost everyone else does this also, they see little problem in continuing the practice.

Yet the result is the loss of divine leadership. It is the absence of the “theocracy” which God has wanted from the beginning. The consequence is religious organizations which have the “form of godliness” but lack the content of the presence of God. Therefore, they have little, if any, supernatural power.

Today we have human beings leading the church in the place of Jesus. These men and women may mean well, but they just can’t do the job. They are incapable of substituting for Jesus.

Since they don’t see into men’s hearts, since they are not omnipresent, since they cannot solve people’s inmost needs, since they cannot orchestrate the lives of all the members in the same way that Jesus can, they end up only producing a very pathetic, poor imitation – a human

organization instead of a divinely led organism which is full of the life of God.

The idea of men heading up or running the body of Christ is as absurd as having an ant trying to substitute for your brain. It is just not possible. The results can never be anything like God intended.

Why is the church today so weak? Why are the attendees not being transformed into the image of Christ? Why is victory over sin so rare or even non-existent? Part of the answer is because we have human leadership instead of divine. We have men taking the place of God. We have the “ants” trying to be the brain. It just doesn’t work and never will.

What we so desperately need is for every believer to get in touch with Jesus themselves. We need a profound repentance for sins which will restore our relationship with God. In this way we can learn to know Him and follow Him.

TRUE LEADERSHIP

Jesus is capable of leading His church, His people. He is well qualified and able. He does this in many ways. First of all, He speaks to and leads each one individually. This is of the greatest importance. Just as every member of a human body is connected to and directed by the head of the body, so every member of Christ must be in touch with and guided by Jesus. Without such intimacy and obedience on the part of every member, the church can never function normally or well.

However, there are always spiritual children in our midst. There will always be some who are immature and, therefore, don’t hear Jesus as well as they should or as they will later on. When such believers need clarification, when they have some doubts or fears, when their faith is still small, from time to time they will need some counsel. They will need older, mature brothers to help them. They will need food and care. This then is the function of the elders.

Such mature brothers will never just tell someone what to do or not to do. Instead, they will help the seeking believers discern what God is already saying to them. They will serve these other brothers or sisters

by aiding them in sorting through the many thoughts, feelings, impulses, etc. which are filling them and tease out the voice of the Lord.

These mature brothers, instead of substituting for God by giving their own advice and opinions, will help these others discern what God is already saying to them.

Furthermore, more mature Christians can be used by God to speak to the rest. This can be in the form of teaching, preaching, a prophetic word or even just a thought or suggestion. Since Jesus is invisible, He often uses members of His body as conduits through which He expresses Himself and His will.

Although the more mature members of Jesus' body are used more frequently by Him to transmit His will, they never become that authority themselves. They are merely channels through which Jesus makes His authority known.

So we see that "eldership" is not a position of authority in the church. It is not an "office" to which someone is elected or appointed. (It should be pointed out here that the word "office" used in the King James Version in 1 Timothy 3, verses 1,10,13 represents no word in the original Greek. Here the translators have created an "office" out of thin air due to their own concepts and religious training. The true meaning of the phrase here is "to serve.")

Instead, elders are simply the more mature men among any group of believers who serve the others with their wisdom and experience with Jesus. They are never organizers or dominators but merely servants through whom the Spirit of God flows from time to time.

DEACONS

"Deacon" is a word used to describe some believers in the New Testament. This word "deacon" is not really a translation of a Greek word but a transliteration. This transliteration was achieved by taking a Greek word and simply inventing an English word which sounds similar. Dictionary.com translates "transliteration" like this: "to change (letters, words, etc.) into corresponding characters of another alphabet or language."

The real translation of the Greek word DIAKONOS is, according to Strong: "One who executes the commands of another, especially of a master. A servant, or attendant." It can also mean "slave." The root word comes from DIAKO, which means to run errands.

How then did such individuals come to exist in the early church? It is true that while Jesus walked on this earth, He never instructed us to have such a thing as deacons. This function among believers came about because of a specific need. Some brothers felt that their widows were being neglected. When food was distributed, their widows were not getting their share. So they complained to the apostles.

However, the "twelve" did not want to be burdened with this task so they asked the brothers to select some others to take care of this necessary service of caring for widows. In this case seven men were selected. This leads us to the conclusion that such "servants," as they should be called, were selected to take care of some special needs among the brethren.

As with the elders, so with the servants, this was not a position of authority. These men had none of their "own" authority and exercised no control over anyone else. Exactly the opposite was true. They were carrying out, for the benefit of the others, a very lowly kind of service.

What being a "deacon" in the church today has come to mean – that of someone having a title and a position of authority – is completely foreign to the thoughts conveyed to us through the scriptures. Somehow, perhaps by importing a Greek word to use as a title instead of actually translating the word into English, we now have a tradition of "deacons" in our midst which is not in harmony with the thoughts of God.

The question of whether such individuals are even necessary today would probably depend upon the special needs of any particular group. Although it seems that the New Testament churches continued this practice, there is nothing in the teachings of Jesus which demands that any and all gatherings of believers have such servants.

In the case of caring for widows, in many cultures this is not a present need. I vividly remember a brother coming to me asking me to help him

find a biblical widow to whom he could give some money. After reading James 1:27, he felt that he should be aiding such widows. But, according to 1 Timothy chapter 5, all the widows he knew were disqualified.

After applying all the restrictions which Paul cited for discerning who is or is not a genuine widow whom the church should support, he couldn't find even one. Since I was about to travel to Romania, he thought perhaps I could find one there.

Today, in most parts of our world, the need for which these men were selected no longer exists. There are very few widows in the "west" who can pass through Paul's screening test. Therefore, there is no present need for any group of men to be selected to serve them.

As already stated, whether it is necessary for any group of believers to specially select brothers to take care of a pressing need, would depend upon the situation, the culture, and the leading of the Holy Spirit. If and when such persons are selected, it is not to run a part of the church but to perform a lowly service for the others under the direction of Jesus.

7.

CAN A CHRISTIAN BE MADE PERFECT?

The other day I had a conversation with a man with whom I was working on a building project. He is a believer and attends a popular, charismatic congregation. As we were working on a particular part of the job, I jokingly said if we did a certain thing wrong, it would be a sin. This comment prompted him to begin talking about what he believed concerning sin. He said something like this: "Well, all Christians sin. We sin every day. We always sin and there doesn't seem to be any prospect of not sinning, so a person just accepts it and asks for forgiveness all the time."

The next day, while meditating on this conversation I realized that this brother is in bondage. He is in bondage to sin and has no hope of escape. He believes that he will keep on sinning until Jesus comes again or he dies and he is finally free from this evil which comes from his human nature. I'm sure that he thinks he shouldn't sin or that God can help him to not do some really "evil" sins, but essentially becoming free from sin seems impossible to him. This poor man is a slave to sin and has no hope of being free.

Many, if not the majority of Christians, seem to think in a similar way. They don't believe that anyone can be made perfect. They think that perfection in this life is impossible. They are resigned to a life of bondage to sin. Perhaps they think that some who have an extremely strong will or are "especially dedicated" can sin less, but a life of continual sinning seems inevitable to them.

The great majority of Christians seem to have no hope of a complete victory over sin. Instead of looking at what Jesus said to us and what the scriptures teach, they base their conclusions on the lives of those they see around them and their own failures in their efforts to quit sinning.

They form their conclusions from the preaching they hear, the books they read, their own experiences and the general attitude of the great majority of believers with whom they associate. They appear to accept their bondage to sin in this world and just hope for something better in the future.

Yes, there are Christians who keep trying. Some believe that if they do their best to be good and try their hardest not to sin, God will understand their weakness when they do sin and be gracious toward them and forgive them. I have heard someone say these very words.

Others have striven for years and years to conquer sin, yet without success. They have become discouraged with the idea of ever being free. Their tendency, after a long time, is just to adjust their thinking and accept some sin in their lives. For such individuals, the forgiveness of God becomes the focus of their faith and their hope of a complete deliverance fades away.

Yet what does the Bible teach us? Peter says in his first letter to the believers: "But as he who is calling you is holy, you too be holy in every aspect of your living because it is written: 'Become holy, for I am holy'" (1 Pet 1:15,16 FLNT). We also read: "In this way, he can establish your hearts *to be* irreproachable in holiness *when you stand* before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones" (1 Thess 3:13 FLNT).

You see, God genuinely expects us to become holy. This is one of His objectives for His work in our lives. This is not an option. It is not something which can be discarded. It is not something which only exists in His mind or from His viewpoint. God's purpose for us is to be conformed to His very own image. Without a doubt His image is completely, utterly holy.

We cannot excuse ourselves. We cannot wish away this divine command. We cannot just hope that God will not notice our unholy condition or that He will just keep on forgiving us. It is necessary for every child of God to become holy.

Yes, this is a very high standard. To become as holy as God seems to be impossible. Of course, if it depended upon our abilities, strength, determination or self-control, it would be impossible. However, this is not the case. Becoming holy is a work which God Himself will do in us. He can and will make us holy. Our part is to be willing, open, yielding and obedient.

Although this work is not done by us, it does require our cooperation. God will never force His will upon us. He will never do anything inside of us unless we are completely willing for Him to do it. If we are fearful, if we are resistant, if we are reluctant to give up some sin or habit that is standing in His way, He will go no further. His work in us in that area stops until we bow to His will and become willing. When we love ourselves, desiring to retain who and what we are, we can never be transformed into His image.

This is very important. We do have our part in God's work. We must be willing for Him to change us.

But how can this holiness be obtained? If it is not dependent on our determination, "consecration" or effort, how can we reach it? The secret is that it is a result of God's own holy life living in us and growing up inside of us. This is very important! True holiness is achieved by God's holy life filling us and expressing its holy nature through us.

You see, God is absolutely holy. He never sins. Sin is repugnant to Him. He cannot even be tempted by it (Jas 1:13). When we are "born from above" (Jn 3:3 FLNT), the life of God Himself is born inside of us. God's plan is that this holy, sinless life would grow up to maturity within us and fill us completely. His idea is that His holy life would substitute for our own sinful one.

We read in 1 John 3:9, "That which is begotten of God [i.e. the new spiritual man] does not sin because *it is* his [God's supernatural] seed *that* has come to live in him. In fact, he [the new spiritual man] cannot sin because it something which is begotten by God *who is perfectly righteous*" (FLNT).

Although the outward "shell" of our human body will not be changed until the coming of the Lord Jesus, we can and should be experiencing a radical, inward change right now. We read that we should be being changed from glory to glory into that same image (2 Cor 3:18). Furthermore, from the end of this same verse we learn that this work is being done by "the Lord, the Spirit."

Yet many still seem to believe that complete perfection is not possible. They seem to think that, although we can be freed from some of the "grosser" sins, a genuine, total holiness is not possible in this life.

When we think in this way, we deny the power of Jesus' death and resurrection. If we insist that perfection or holiness is not possible, what we are really saying is that Jesus' work on the cross and his resurrection from the grave was inadequate. It was not powerful enough to do the job completely. Therefore, it must have been a sort of half-baked effort which fell short of God's goal.

Please think about this a moment. Can it be that Jesus' work was incomplete? Is it possible that all that he did was just partially effective? Is the reality that we can only be made a little better, but not truly

perfected? Is God's power in us limited or restricted? If it is, it is certainly not limited on His part!

Could it be that Jesus didn't really die completely, or that He wasn't truly dead when He was buried or even that, at His resurrection, He left some of Himself in the tomb? Is it possible that our co-death and resurrection with Him was only partial and didn't completely do the job? Of course, it is foolish to imagine such things.

The truth is that Jesus' work on our behalf was complete. He said, "It is finished {or, completed}" (John 19:30 FLNT). Nothing was left undone or just partially finished. This means that a complete salvation – a total deliverance from who and what we are – is available to every believer.

Hebrews 7:25 teach us that, "Therefore, he is able to save completely {absolutely, entirely} those who are continually drawing near to God through him" (FLNT).

Paul, the apostle, had the full and intense expectation of being perfected. He writes, "Not that I have already fully obtained *it* or have already been perfected but I press on so that I may take possession of that for which the Anointed one, Jesus, also took possession of me" (Phil 3:12 FLNT).

This should also be our hope. We are no different from Paul. We have the same God. He has given us all His same divine life and it is this life which can grow up in us until we are like Him.

Adding to this idea, let us read together from Ephesians 1:7, "*It is in him that we have our release by ransom through his blood, even the release from bondage to our sins, according to the liberality of his grace...*" (FLNT). Also in Colossians 1:14 it is written, "*And it is through his Son that we have the release by ransom – the liberation from our sins – through his *shedding his blood**" (FLNT).

This word translated here "release by ransom" in the Greek language is APOLUTROSIS which means "to pay the ransom price in full." Now when someone is held captive (in our case it means to be held captive to sin) and the full ransom price is paid for them, then that person is set free. They are no longer held in captivity.

Therefore, since Jesus paid the full ransom price for us, it means that we too can be set free. We too can be released completely from the bondage of continually practicing sin. Please notice that the ransom price was not partially paid. It was paid in full. Therefore, we can be and, in fact, should be being liberated completely from our bondage to sin.

If, then, it is true that we can be perfected, why don't we see many, if any, really holy Christians? Where are the real "saints?" Why are so few believers escaping from the bondage of sin?

One sad reason is that very few believe in and, therefore, are seeking to arrive at this Christ-like state. Their unbelief blocks them from ever arriving at the goal. They have no expectation of liberation from their sins and so they can never be set free.

Another reason we don't see many perfect Christians is that the truth is hidden from them. They don't understand how this perfection can occur. They don't see that it is the holy life of God growing up in them through Christ which is the key to perfection. So they keep trying by their own efforts and inevitably fail. The lack of light keeps them from pressing on to maturity. Furthermore, as we will see later on in this article, sometimes the cost seems too great for them.

Still another reason we don't see many perfected believers is that God doesn't allow the "fruit" to rot on the vine. For example, when you go to your garden in summertime and there you see the first, really ripe red tomato, you don't leave it there. You harvest it and take it into your house.

God often operates the same way. When the fruit is ready, He takes it home. The few believers who have the faith and willingness to press on to perfection are not left here on earth when they have become "ripe."

WHERE DOES SIN COME FROM?

Sin is a spontaneous product of the Adamic life which we inherited from our ancestors. The scriptures of the New Testament call this the "soul-life" or PSUCHÊ in Greek. This life has a sinful nature which means that it produces sin naturally and spontaneously.

Let's be very clear about this. Sin is the product of the fallen nature. It is an integral part of the makeup of every human being. We sin, not because we slip up once in a while, but because it is part of the nature of who and what we are by birth.

Now there is no way for this to change. There is no way to alter the inherent nature of this PSUCHÊ life. In the same way that a leopard cannot change the spots on its skin, we cannot change the nature of our fallen life. Please notice this fact.

The nature of any life is inherent in it. It cannot be changed. There is absolutely no possibility for the nature of our Adamic, soul-life to be altered. Although many Christians may hope that they can make themselves better by Bible study, following certain religious practices or teachings, obeying some leader or other, or even being very hard on themselves, this is not the case.

Please pay careful attention to the following fact. The only way to become free from sin is to die. Only dead people don't sin! That's right, the only hope for our soul-life to be free from sin is for it to be killed. Even though, through Jesus Christ, we can be forgiven for our sins, the only way to be liberated from our human tendency to sin is through death. This truth may seem very harsh, yet it is true. There simply is no other solution.

But, glory be to God! He has provided a way for us to experience death and yet not be completely eliminated. You see, when Jesus died on the cross, we died with Him. In some divine way which we do not fully understand, we were included in this death (Gal 2:20).

This means that there is a real death available to believers. We can genuinely experience the death of our old life with its sinful nature. Through the Holy Spirit, our co-death with Jesus can become real in our lives. His death can be applied to our soul-life so that it ceases to live and so stops producing the sin that so constantly grieves us.

However, this death requires our willing cooperation. We must be willing for this death to occur. God will not force this experience upon us. He will never push us. He always completely respects our free will.

Until and unless we are completely willing to experience the loss of our soul-life, it will not happen.

When we still love ourselves, when we still imagine that we are basically good people, when we still appreciate things about ourselves, then we can never be free. We can't be liberated from who and what we are. This death has a cost. It will cost us our own natural, Adamic life (PSUCHÊ).

Our experience of a genuine death to our soul-life demands our willing obedience. We must submit ourselves to God's judgment. We must recognize our sin and agree with His judgment upon it. This is called "repentance." This means agreeing that our own life must die because of its sinfulness.

Such deep repentance, which results in our willingness to die, is a result of supernatural light. When God shines His light on us, we see ourselves as He sees us. We understand our condition in the light in His holy nature. We realize how ugly our human nature is compared to His righteousness.

When, through His mercy, God reveals our sin, then we have the privilege of being free from it. We can agree with His judgment upon our old life. This then opens the way for Him to apply the death of Christ to us. This is the way, the only way, that we can be freed from sin.

Not only can we enter into the experience of Jesus' death, but we also can be included in His resurrection. That's right. We can also experience our co-resurrection with Him. This is something which every child of God can and, in fact, should be knowing for themselves. This is a wonderful thing. To experience the resurrection of Christ in our own lives is to live in victory over sin. It means to know the power of God operating in us to a greater degree.

Here we encounter an important truth. No living person can resurrect. This is only possible for the dead. Therefore, to know this great liberty, to experience this wonderful freedom, it is first necessary to us to pass through death.

Paul teaches us in Romans 6:5, “For as we become united together with *him* in the form of his death, *to that same degree* we will also be *like him* in his resurrection” (FLNT).

Also in Philippians 3:10,11 we read Paul saying, “*I want* to know him and the power of his resurrection – *which comes* through participating in his sufferings and becoming integrated into his death – so that in this way I may be experiencing the resurrection from the dead” (FLNT).

So we see that our liberation from sin and our being made holy are the result of the death and resurrection of Jesus operating in our lives. Our co-death with him puts an end to our sinful, Adamic life and our co-resurrection with him fills us more and more with his own holy life.

This should be the experience of every Christian. If it is not your experience, you need to seek God for his grace and mercy so that this blessing can be yours. No one is too weak. No case is too difficult for God. When we are willing, calling out to him for his liberating work to be done in our lives, he will lead us in the way of his cross and our liberation.

Will this be easy? No. Will it involve pain and suffering, sometimes even very intense? Yes it probably will. But there is no other way to be holy. There is no other way to be free from who and what we are. There is no other way to be perfected by being transformed into his glorious image. Dying to our self is never easy, but it’s well worth the price.

God’s holiness, which can be ours through a walk of faith in the way we have been describing, is the most valuable, precious, beautiful thing. It is an expression of God’s own life and nature.

Please do not shrink back from this. It is worth everything through which you must pass to obtain it. Don’t settle for less! Make God’s own holiness your aim! You will have all of eternity to enjoy its benefits.

THE HUMAN BODY

It seems important to add here that our human body is also full of sin. It too has fallen appetites and desires. The body has yearnings for food, comfort, pleasure, sex and other things. These things may not be sinful

in and of themselves since they are natural needs, yet the body often desires these things in excess or at times and in situations which are not holy.

Yet our body is not changed in this life. This perfection which is ours does not reach to the physical body before the resurrection of the dead. This “part” of us will only be changed later on.

For this reason Paul teaches us that our new spiritual man should rule over our physical body. We must not let our physical appetites dominate us. He says: “But I treat my body severely and bring it into subjection...” (1 Cor 9:27 FLNT).

We must be constantly on guard so that our fallen body does not motivate our behavior and so bring us into sin. Instead our lives must be guided by the life of God in our spirit – our new spiritual man.

God’s solution for this part of our being – our body – will only come at the time of our resurrection. It is at that moment our body will be glorified. The effects of the fall will be eliminated completely and Jesus’ victory over sin will be gloriously revealed.

In the meantime, however, we must never imagine that we could not sin anymore. Even if our soul-life is being crucified and our new spiritual man is leading our daily living, it is always possible for the fallen body to trip us up. We must constantly be vigilant.

Included here are some verses which speak to us about how much God desires us to be – and expects us to be – holy. These verses are taken from the New International Version:

“To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 1:7).

“To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ – their Lord and ours” (1 Cor 1:2). “...to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word and to present her to himself as a radiant church,

without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" (Eph 5:26, 27).

"May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones" (1 Thess 3:13).

"For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life" (1 Thess 4:7).

"Those who cleanse themselves from the latter will be instruments for special purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work" (2 Tim 2:21).

"Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters" (Heb 2:11).

"Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Heb 12:14).

"But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do..." (1 Pet 1:15)

"Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives" (2 Pet 3:11)

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