

In Search Of The LOST LOVE



**Restoration Of Gospel Motivation
As A Disciple Of The Son Of God**

DICKSON

In Search Of The Lost Love

Roger E. Dickson

CONTENTS

| |
|---|
| Preface – 3 |
| Introduction – 7 |
| 1 – <i>The Right Page</i> – 10 |
| 2 – <i>The Gospel Core</i> – 13 |
| 3 – <i>The Gospel Connection</i> – 17 |
| 4 – <i>Wrong Responses</i> – 20 |
| 5 – <i>The Right Cut</i> – 23 |
| 6 – <i>Cry Freedom!</i> – 24 |
| 7 – <i>Freedom From Legalism</i> – 26 |
| 8 – <i>Responsive Faith</i> – 30 |
| 9 – <i>Gospel Versus Self</i> – 32 |
| 10 – <i>Freedom For Captives</i> – 34 |
| 11 – <i>Gospel Relationships</i> – 36 |
| 12 – <i>Attacking The Gospel</i> – 41 |
| 13 – <i>Losing The Objective</i> – 43 |
| 14 – <i>Losing Out On Love</i> – 45 |
| 15 – <i>Gospel Motivation</i> – 49 |
| 16 – <i>Losing One Another</i> – 52 |
| 17 – <i>Common Gospel Mission</i> – 56 |
| 18 – <i>The Living Dead Church</i> – 58 |
| 19 – <i>Knowing God</i> – 61 |
| 20 – <i>“That Silly Cross”</i> – 67 |
| Epilogue – <i>Into The Streets</i> – 70 |

rdickson@mweb.co.za

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Facebook: Africa International.org

Philadelphia, Western Cape, South Africa

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Preface

Since we live in a very confusing world of religion, I thought it would be good to research again our motives as Christians, both in reference to our life-style, as well as our motivation to preach the gospel. This book will sometimes be uncomfortable when reading, for it will challenge our hearts in reference to our gospel life-style. Throughout our lives we must continually re-examine ourselves on this subject lest we end up with a lost love that plagued the Christians in Ephesus.

Since our faith is in our Lord Jesus Christ, the only source for challenging our motives in reference to our faith is the recorded life and message of Jesus in the Bible. We must never find ourselves being complacent in reference to our faith, or embarrassed by others whose motives for preaching the gospel are contrary to that which we read in the Bible.

It is not wrong to consider the zeal of others as a witness to the conviction that is produced by the gospel. However, we must be cautious concerning the motives that drive others. The motivation of people can vary drastically from one individual to another. We admire conviction, but our only source to determine true conviction is the word of God. We would caution ourselves about measuring our motivation by what others do. Some Corinthian disciples seemed to have involved themselves in such

competition when they compared themselves with themselves (2 Co 10:11).

However, we find it difficult to question conviction when the end result is the proclamation of the gospel. Paul said the same in reference to some in Rome who preached the gospel, though their motives were wrong:

Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some also from good will. The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not with pure motives ... (Ph 1:15-18).

Our desire is to preach Christ out of love with pure motives, not with selfish ambition. In this book I have sought to explain the driving force of the gospel of love that motivates one to do exceedingly above in our lives what he or she could ever imagine. When the power of the gospel works freely in our lives, we are always surprised by what we can do in the name of Jesus (Ep 3:20).

All of us seek to discover the gospel power that moved the early believers to be so zealous in a world of misguided religiosity. I firmly believe that the Holy Spirit had a specific purpose for recording the impact

the gospel had on the lives of the early disciples. He wanted us to have a record of gospel-obedient examples in order that we can look into the lives of the first disciples for victories in reference to living the gospel. Those early gospel-driven disciples turned the world upside down with the power of the gospel. I believe we can do the same today (At 17:6).

When Paul wrote, *“Be imitators of me **even as** I also am of Christ,”* he put a condition on his example (1 Co 11:1). That condition was “even as” he followed Christ. For us today, this means that we must always look past the examples of misguided religionists who surround us in order to discover the gospel power that moved Paul and others in the first century into all their known world. The Lord Jesus Christ was revealed in the flesh in order to leave us a gospel example of love by which we could judge the behavior of every man, as well as examine our own motives (See 2 Co 13:5). And so, we judge the behavior of gospel-driven people by what we see in Christ.

This may sound simple. But because we live in a world of such diverse beliefs in reference to what is generally classified—but erroneously—under the label of “Christianity,” we must be careful. People have been captivated by a host of diversions away from being motivated by the gospel. Many have simply substituted “another gospel” as the motivation for their efforts to proclaim

Jesus, just as other misguided religionists in the first century (See Gl 1:6-9).

One of the most tempting motivations to follow Jesus is what has become known today as the “prosperity gospel.” This is nothing new, for Satan tempted Jesus with the same promise that is also made by false prophets today: *“All these things I will give You,”* Satan promised Jesus, *“if You will fall down and worship me”* (Mt 4:9).

Promises of riches have come forth from the mouths of thousands of financial prophets throughout the world of religion. This is the preaching of another gospel. Those who have been duped into believing that Christianity is an investment scheme are moved by a narcissistic lust for the things of this world. Such a motivation is the exact opposite of the motivation of the gospel. In one statement, the Holy Spirit corrected the deception of the financial prophets: *“If you were raised with Christ [through obedience of the gospel], **seek those things that are above ... not on things on the earth**”* (Cl 3:1,2).

Gospel is about what we can give, not what we can get. The mind that was in Christ was about giving up the riches of heaven for the poverty of this world (Ph 2:5-8). This is what Jesus did, and this is the mind that Paul said we should have. It is as the widow who gave her last two coins. Jesus established her legacy with the words, *“She out of her pov-*

erty has put in all the livelihood that she had” (Lk 21:4).

There are millions in the world today who are trapped in the bondage of those who promise the riches of this world. But they need to join with Jesus in His gospel sacrifice in order to be delivered from the bondage of false hopes.

The stirring of guilt has also become “another gospel” that has gone forth from the mouths of those who seek the bounty of filled collection plates, or the satisfaction of well-performed religious rites. But this is misplaced guilt. Guilt is certainly involved in our motivation to respond to the grace of God. However, this is guilt that takes place in our hearts **before** we are obedient to the gospel, not after. One reason for the revelation of the gospel was to relieve us of our guilt over sins. Jesus came to set us free from ourselves and religion. Guilt on the part of the Christian can never be a correct motivation to proclaim the guilt-delivering message of the gospel. Gratitude always replaces guilt when one obeys the gospel. And it is because Jesus has delivered us from the guilt of sin that we are moved into all the world with the message of a guilt-free faith for those who are in the bondage of religion.

All the preceding motivational standards of religion must always be separated from true Christianity. I pray that the confusion of religiosity that has generated motivations wrapped up in religion will in some

way be unpacked in the chapters that follow. There are all sorts of false motivations for faith that are entangled in religious behavior. I have sought in this book to dig through these false motives that often hinder us in our efforts to unleash the power of the gospel in our lives. If we can honestly dig past religion and reach into the inner most parts of our own hearts, then possibly this book has accomplished its purpose to help us discover the true motivation that should characterize gospel-driven people.

By the end of the book, I will eventually come to the Holy Spirit’s examples of diverted motives for being a Christian. The seven churches of Asia are the Spirit’s examples of what can unfortunately develop in our hearts after years in the faith. If we find ourselves somewhere among the fellowship of the seven churches, particularly the disciples in Ephesus, then we are in trouble. If we find ourselves among the Ephesian disciples, we may have lost our primary motivation for being a Christian.

The final conclusion to this book is to discover the true motivation of the gospel. This is the only motivation that should drive our faith and lives. Any other motive for the Christian is a diversion away from the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Any diversion away from the prime motivation of the gospel in the life of the Christian always leads the Christian away from God.

Those motivations that define re-

ligion are always a diversion. They sustain the feeling of guilt as we struggle to live according to “another gospel” we have created after our own traditions. In fact, one can determine if his or her motivation for faith is true if the burden of guilt has been lifted when he or she comes from the waters of baptism in obedience to the gospel.

The purpose of this book, therefore, is to restore in our lives the pure motivational power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The power of the gospel is the defining difference between religion and Christianity. Once we discover this power, then our lives as Christians will be restored with that refreshing original appeal that brought us to the cross, grave and

resurrection with Jesus. The Christian life is a walk of thanksgiving to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit for all that was done through the Son’s incarnational offering at the cross. We do not through our own self-righteous religiosity seek to spoil all that Jesus accomplished for us at the cross. We must release the power of His life into ours in order to enjoy His peace that surpasses any peace that can be delivered by any religion of this world. It will be then that ...

... the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Ph 4:7).

INTRODUCTION

If we would define God as love—the Bible so states—then we must arrive at a necessary conclusion in reference to God’s intervention (transcendence) into that which He created. The existence of a god who would be as cold and indifferent as space would be a logical contradiction. If god were cold and indifferent, then the first problem with the existence of this god would be that there would be no impetus for creating that which is defined by emotion. The fact that we are emotional beings who are blessed with the innate motivation to love presupposes that we originated from that which at least had the limits of our own emotional character. If god were cold and indifferent, and we were the product of such a being, then certainly we would also be cold and indifferent.

But we are not cold and indifferent. We are emotional. We love. It would not be logical, therefore, to assume that a cold and indifferent god would create something that was of a higher emotional character than himself. On the contrary, we would conclude that in his creation, he would of necessity create that which would be inferior to what or who he is as the creator. God could not create something better than Himself. God cannot even create another God. But here

we are with the ability to love. And since we love—though handicapped with limits to our love—then we are driven to conclude that it is God who brought us into existence. We are not the product of some cosmic god we have created after our own imagination. We also assume that this creating God loves beyond the limits of our love that is inferior to His love.

This reasoning excites our imagination with wonder concerning who and what this God would be. We do have at least one necessary conclusion: Since we love, then we of necessity presuppose that our Creator is love. And since we must confess that our love is flawed, then we must conclude that His love is far above the love we can express for one another.

This brings us to another necessary conclusion: We are because He is, and thus, we love because we are the expression of His love. Our existence drives us to conclude that He exists, for love cannot spontaneously generate out of cold and indifferent matter.

Our existence as loving beings, therefore, is the first “proof” of His existence. And since love cannot exist alone in eternity, then we had to be brought into existence. His love, therefore, was the prime motivation for our existence, for eternal love had

to find expression in creating that which would return love. Therefore, we conclude that He exists because we as loving creatures are the product of His existence. On the other hand, we would all be atheists in reference to believing in a cold and indifferent entity being the “creator” of that which was supposedly greater than the creator himself.

(All this is what makes the philosophy of evolution so preposterous. Evolutionary philosophy makes matter in motion the creator of something—us—that is greater than unloving matter itself. For this reason, this philosophy is inherently atheistic in reference to the God of love about whom the Bible speaks.)

Now that we are here, there was the necessity of that which would predicate the “Eternal Lover” transcending what He created. Think of this for a moment. Our existence is based on one conclusion in reference to why we are here. If our Creator created, then we must assume that He created us for eternal dwelling with Him in eternity. After all, what foolishness it would have been on the part of God to create individuals who would have only a few years of existence? God would be fiendish if He created those who would have only a brief taste of existence, and then vanish into an abyss of nothingness after our last breath. How could this God

be love if He only desired a few years of our loving existence?

Because God desired to fill His eternal house with residents, He created within us a spirit that had eternal potential. This is a logical conclusion in reference to a God we have defined as love. But if we have eternal potential, then there must be a road map, that as free-moral beings, we can use to find our way into His presence. And this would assume ... necessitate ... that in His presence of eternal light, we must have light within us wherein we voluntarily submit to who He is. There would be no room for rebels in eternity. (The last free-moral rebels who were formerly there were kicked out.) Since sin is the problem of rebels, then there had to be a fix for sin.

And thus, there was the necessity for a transcendent intervention on the part of our Creator into our environment in order to deal with the problem of rebels who would seek to go their own way, which would be away from their Creator. In order to offer a fix sin, the One who was responsible for creation of necessity had to make a journey into the bowels of His creation in order to reveal the love of the Creator. He had to go on a mission of love in order to take those whom He loved back into eternity.

Since it was the original purpose of the Creator to bring the created into

His presence for eternity, the transcendent invasion of the Creator had to be of such a nature that honest rebels would respond to the awesomeness of true love, the love that originated their very existence. This transcendent invasion we call the **gospel!**

Because we exist, the gospel is a logical necessity. If there were no gospel invasion, then we are back to a cold and indifferent “entity” that we

suppose exists in cold space. But this is a logical contradiction in reference to the fact that we have the ability to love one another. The gospel is evidence of a transcendent God who loves us. Our love necessitated that He exists, and that His love for us is greater than we could ever love one another. Therefore, His love for us demanded that He transcend our existence for which He is responsible.

1 THE RIGHT PAGE

We need to make sure that we are on the same page when we are using the word “gospel.” This word is used in the religious world so frequently by those who know little Bible, but seek to portray that they know the gospel. The best some can preach about the matter is to say that the gospel is “good news.” And such the word means. But the gospel is good news about what? We use the word “what,” but the gospel is both “what” and “who.” It involves something that was done by Someone who transcended into the realm in which we dwell.

Some hold up the Bible and cry out, “You must obey this gospel,” thinking that the Bible is the gospel. They are wrong. The gospel is not obedience to a rule book. It is not ink and paper. Some cry out, “Believe on Jesus. He is the gospel!” These folks are right, but often fall short of understanding the totality of the gospel. Jesus was certainly the One through whom the gospel was revealed, but He alone was not all the eternal good news that was revealed through Him. Behind Him was a loving Father of grace who sent His only begotten Son into the world. It was the Father, Son and Holy Spirit working together as one in order to implement the gospel plan of salvation for us. Jesus, therefore, was not working alone. Neither

was He simply a good teacher of Israel. If He were only a good rabbi, then the message of the gospel that He revealed to us would only be the words of some religious sage of history, as is characteristic of Islam, Buddhism and Confucianism.

One is also somewhat legalistic in teaching that one must “hear,” “believe,” “repent,” “confess,” and “be baptized.” Although this message led many to “reenact” the gospel, the message failed to put all emphasis on the gospel. It was affirmed that hear–believe–repent–confess–be baptized was the gospel, to which one must render obedience in order to be saved. In preaching such steps to conversion, we were somewhat lacking in fully understanding and presenting the gospel as the primary motive for obedience to the gospel.

We preached this for many years, but these legal instructions were not the gospel. We were preaching instructions surrounding the gospel, but not the gospel itself. We legally convinced people to hear, believe, repent, confess and be baptized often without ever mentioning the incarnational sacrifice of a loving God who sent His only begotten Son into an unloving world. We emphasized the response to the gospel, but not the total gospel itself. This was not how Peter the apostle revealed the gospel on Pentecost.

Fifty years ago someone wrote that when he approached those who had not obeyed the gospel that he used the book of Romans to teach the gospel. Romans is God's book on grace, and thus, the preacher who was using the book of Romans to preach the gospel was on track. But we would say that there is more to the gospel than grace alone. Grace is an action that is unleashed in order to offer mercy for our crimes against God. Mercy implements grace, and thus, as in the Old Testament, God's loving-kindness (grace) was constantly revealed through His patience with Israel and their wayward ways.

The translators' manufactured the English word "loving-kindness." Nevertheless, the word moves us in the right direction. It moves us toward God's motive and action toward all humanity in the eventual offer of the blood of His incarnate Son (See Rm 3:24,25). The word "loving-kindness" moves us to the heart of a loving God who of necessity must be merciful, and thus in His mercy, offer grace. Though illustrated numerous times throughout the history of Israel, loving-kindness (grace) was released from heaven in order to forgive the sins of those who found themselves separated from God (Is 59:2).

Of necessity, loving-kindness had to originate from a God of love. When we seek to understand the gos-

pel, we must first understand the nature of God. Gospel is an act of love, and thus the origin of the gospel of necessity had to come from a God who is defined as love. No fiendish or unjust god could ever be the origin of the gospel. For this reason, the gospel is something totally unique with Christianity. In their invention of religion, no religious teacher would ever have formulated a gospel action on behalf of man as is explained in the Bible.

Gospel and a fiendish or unjust god would be a logical contradiction. A God who "so loved the world" could never be fiendish, or vindictive. A God who would eternally be made in the likeness of those whom He created could never be unmerciful. Therefore, in order to understand the nature of the gospel, one must understand the nature of the One from whom the gospel originated.

These prerequisites to understand the gospel move us to that historical day two thousand years ago in which the gospel was first announced to humanity. Before we get to that day, we have always wondered why Jesus appeared after His resurrection to two men on a lonely road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-29). We would assume that He wanted to help us understand that the gospel that was about to be announced a few weeks later went beyond His crucifixion and resurrection.

After some discussion on the road, over a meal Jesus eventually revealed Himself to the two sojourners. They came to realize that His presence with them assumed His resurrection, but they still had no understanding of the purpose of the cross. During the walk, the two men confessed that Jesus was to them only “*a prophet mighty in deed and word*” (Lk 24:19). They, and many in Israel, “*were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel*” (Lk 24:21). As the apostles, they too had nationalistic hopes in Jesus as a national redeemer from Roman oppression (At 1:6). But they were all wrong. They still did not understand the meaning of the cross and significance of the resurrection. They had not yet experienced the ascension.

After witnessing the crucifixion, the two men on the road to Emmaus, as well as everyone else, still did not connect the dots between all the prophecies and the One who stood resurrected before them. All of them still had to go through “*prophecy school*” in order to understand Jesus’ link to what the prophecies said He would be. Prior to His ascension to reign, Jesus said to the apostles,

“These are the words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled that were written in the law of Moses and the

Prophets and the Psalms, concerning Me.” Then He opened their understanding so that they might understand the Scriptures (Lk 24:44,45).

But they still had no idea what the gospel was. We believe Jesus made the appearance to the two men on the road to Emmaus in order to help us understand that the event of the cross **was not** the gospel. The gospel was not defined by the historical event of the death and resurrection of Jesus. It would take more revelation from the Father in order for the early witnesses of the resurrection to conclude that truly the God of love had revealed His heart to all men through the cross for the salvation of all who would believe on the crucified Jesus. Before the marvelous day of Pentecost, both the event of the cross and resurrection were only historical events that brought joy to hearts, but did not explain the gospel of grace that the events revealed.

The historical event of the crucifixion was not initially an explanation of the gospel of redemption. Neither did the resurrection confirm the power of the gospel. Thousands of people had been crucified by the Romans before Jesus. But all these crucifixions were simply executions, as thought all those who initially witnessed the crucifixion (“*execution*”)

of Jesus. But by the power of His resurrection, the supposed “execution” of the Son of God was confirmed to be more than an execution (Rm 1:4,5). However, no one connected the events surrounding the crucifixion and resurrection with God’s eternal redemption plan. They did not until Peter and the apostles connected all the prophecies on the day of Pentecost with the cross that demonstrated the love of God.

Nevertheless, for us who now know the rest of the story, the cross revealed the total humanity of the One who sacrificed His existence in the form of God in order to be “*made in the likeness of men*” (Ph 2:6,7). For those immediate witnesses, this would be explained a little over six weeks later on Pentecost after the apostles and two men on the road to Emmaus had many sleepless nights.

2 THE GOSPEL CORE

The Holy Spirit knew that there would eventually come the skepticism of the Gnostics the latter part of the first century, which theology would be formalized gnosticism in the second century. Since God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all, the Gnostics erroneously assumed that the revelation of God through Jesus Christ meant that Jesus Christ was only a phantom. There could be no

such thing as an incarnation because God could have no contact with evil flesh. Those who would teach such would be of those about whom John later wrote: “*For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess that Jesus Christ is coming in the flesh*” (2 Jn 7). They would not confess that Jesus Christ is now what He was after the incarnational resurrection.

Jesus’ final coming in the flesh of man is foundational in defining the gospel. There could have been no cross if He had not first come in the flesh. The Gnostics, therefore, denied the gospel by denying the eternal incarnational sacrifice of the Son of God. The Gnostic’s denial encourages us to reaffirm the prerequisite for the truth of the gospel. There could have been no gospel if there were truly no incarnation, which incarnation was in some way eternal, for He is coming in the flesh, into which flesh we will become like He now is (1 Jn 3:2).

We must conclude that the gospel (good news) was first revealed through the incarnation of the transcendent God who came into the physical world of our existence:

- **An unending incarnational existence:**

Now we have come to a necessity that explains the superlative,

“*God so loved the world*” (Jn 3:16). The revelation of the gospel began on earth with an unending incarnational birth in Bethlehem that will continue to the final coming of Jesus in the flesh of a glorious body (1 Jn 3:2). The incarnation would continue even into eternity wherein Jesus will dwell among His brethren in the presence of God. The gospel necessitates the incarnation of the One who was originally in eternity in the form of God (Jn 1:1,2,14). If Jesus were only a man, then there would be no such thing as the gospel. If there were no incarnation, then there would have been no offering. His sacrificial offering necessitated His incarnation in the flesh of man. So, the Gnostics were wrong.

- **Eternal (sufficient) atoning sacrifice:**

Since it was not logical or possible that created animals could possibly atone for sins against the eternal God (Hb 10:1-4), then there had to be a volunteer from God to repair the damage our sin created in our fellowship with God. That which was in the form of God, the Son, had to make the eternal gospel journey from the presence of God to our presence on earth, and eventually to a sacrificial cross (See Ph 2:5-8). There was no other way.

We must conclude that the incarnation of the Son of God moves our understanding of the gospel beyond the cross alone. The fact that God the Son gave up being in the form of God in the spirit assumes the suffering that all of us in the flesh confront throughout our own lives. His suffering in the flesh began in a manger in Bethlehem and extended to the first driven nails through His flesh on the cross. When we speak of the incarnation, therefore, we understand that the sacrifice was more than the cross. This explains what John meant when he identified the deceiver as the one who denied the incarnation. We thus understand that the gospel sacrifice of the incarnation went far beyond His few hours on the cross.

His was an extreme love for us in that He was willing to be eternally incarnate in the flesh in order to transition us from our present flesh into that gloriously transformed flesh in which He now exists (See Ph 3:21; 1 Jn 3:2). (For more research on this subject, consult Book 73, chapters 1-3, *The Gospel of God's Heart*, Biblical Research Library, africainternational.org.)

Comprehending the incarnational journey of the Son of God from the form of God in the spirit to the flesh of man is most difficult to comprehend (Ph 2:5-11). In fact, from a human perspective it is incomprehen-

sible, for we are not God. But the more we understand our sin, and our inability to live without sin, the more we begin to catch a small glimmer of hope in understanding the awesome love of God.

Understanding that the eternal God who existed in spirit would contemplate venturing out of eternal, spirit dwelling into our sin infested world is stunning. It is overwhelming. It is humbling. It knocks all pretentiousness out of our souls. It moves our hearts to the declarative question, “*Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of this death?*” (Rm 7:24).

In the preceding question, it was as if Paul—the self-confessed chief of sinners—could now understand the revelation of the Spirit that poured forth from the tip of his fingers on a quill while he inscribed the inspired words of a manuscript to the Romans. We assume that his hands were quivering in thanksgiving as he inscribed these thoughts. A tear may have smudged the ink as he followed with an outburst of gratitude: “***I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord***” (Rm 7:25).

The heart that is not emotionally overwhelmed by the eternal incarnational coming of the Son of God into the flesh of man is certainly a heart that is beyond submission. It is a heart that has disqualified itself from dwell-

ing in the eternal presence of the God of sacrificial love. It is a heart that does not know God.

- **The resurrectional ascension and reign:**

The resurrection of Jesus was necessary to validate the purpose of the cross. The cross would have no power if there were no hope of eternal living for all those who would fall prostrate before the incarnational offering of the Son of God. The resurrection proved Jesus to be the Son of God (Rm 1:4,5). It also proved that those who obey the gospel will have life eternal as a result of their obedience to the gospel for the remission of sins (At 2:38).

The ascension was necessary in order to prove that the supposed resuscitated Jesus did not wander off into obscurity and die, as some Gnostics of the second century claimed. Reigning at the right hand of God, required the ascension, and ascension required the resurrection from the dead. All of this is good news. It is gospel.

The cross alone would be meaningless if it were not for the resurrection. The resurrection could be questioned without the ascension. And the ascension would be meaningless without somewhere for Jesus to be in reference to our existence in the midst

of Satan here on earth. This is all gospel, for the sacrifice of the incarnate Son of God solved our reconciliation with God for eternity. His resurrection solved our fatalism in believing that this world is all there is. The ascension solved our wonder as to where He went. And His reign solves our anxiety problem that no matter what transpires in this life, Jesus is still King of kings and Lord of lords with authority over all things (Mt 28:18; 1 Tm 6:15). This is great news! This is gospel!

And thus, we are brought into Jerusalem for the Passover/Pentecost feast of A.D. 30 where all the dots between prophecy and fulfillment were connected, and the reality of an ascension and reign were proclaimed by twelve Spirit-inspired men. It was on this Pentecost that the totality of the gospel was revealed through the apostles upon whom the Holy Spirit came with the sound of a mighty wind, and finally, the revelation that the gospel was more than an execution by Roman soldiers.

What was preached on Pentecost, and the response of the people, explain the power the gospel can have over the lives of honest faith-oriented people. What happened on that day helps us separate the gospel from religion, for there were in Jerusalem on that occasion the most faithful religionists of the world. We must fol-

low closely the message and response on that day lest we allow our religion to confuse us concerning the very heart of the gospel.

All of us must confess that we have some self-sanctifying religiosity in our hearts. Unless we confess up to this fact, the gospel will never work its full power in transforming our lives. When we think we can do it on our own, the motivating power of the grace of God is severely handicapped. We must spiritually struggle, therefore, to allow the gospel of grace to penetrate deep into our religiosity in order to touch the inner sanctuary of our hearts. If we do not, then religion will continue to reign in a self-righteous heart where Jesus seeks to reign without any competition of our own religiosity.

Men can live as pagan/heathen/unbelievers, that characterizes most of the world. Or they can live a religious life that defines almost everyone else. But then we have the opportunity of living the gospel. On the Passover/Pentecost feast of Acts 2 there were religionists in town who had perfected religiosity to a precise systematic theology that was unmatched with any other religion throughout the world at the time. Paul, who lived the religion, defined the faith as Judaism, or the "Jews' religion" (Gl 1:13).

On the Pentecost of A.D. 30 there were also in town some idolatrous un-

believers. Roman soldiers were there, many of whom were idolaters who followed after Roman religion. But the vast majority of the multitudes were Judeo-religionists who had journeyed from the far corners of the Roman world in order to attend the Passover/Pentecost feast (At 2:5). About 3,000 faithful Jewish religionists had journeyed to Jerusalem under the banner of Judaism. When the feast was over, they returned home as gospel-transformed disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The gospel penetrated the hearts of about 3,000 dedicated religionists on Pentecost. Therefore, when honest and sincere people are confronted with the power of the gospel, change happens. Even an extreme religionist as Saul of Tarsus, who was engrossed in Judaism, can give way to the power of the gospel (See Ph 3:3-5; 1 Tm 1:13).

Religiosity can open the door for the gospel. But we must understand that the gospel of grace must eventually peel away all our pretentious self-righteous religiosity. The power of the gospel cannot fully be realized in our lives until Jesus reigns as King of our hearts.

3 THE GOSPEL CONNECTION

Something happened on that memorial Pentecost of A.D. 30 that

separates religion from gospel. After the Holy Spirit had connected all the dots in the minds of the apostles through the baptism of the Holy Spirit, they were ready for the world (At 2:1-4). Even after Jesus had graduated them from His final “school of prophecy,” the Spirit had to connect the eternal incarnation of the Son, to the eternal offering, resurrection, ascension, and reign of the Son of God to the right hand of God. It was then that they were ready to stand up and go to work before the multitudes (At 2:14).

It may have been about midday when Peter finally stood up with the eleven and unpacked the gospel with only a few words. He first revealed that all the rushing “wind storm” that had transpired at the beginning of the day was actually prophesied (At 2:14-21). And then he got down to gospel business in the reign of Jesus who was now both Lord and Christ.

Jesus of Nazareth was miraculously proved to be the One sent from God. He was miraculously validated to be the Christ of Israel. However, the confirming miracles that validated His Messiahship were not the gospel (At 2:22; Jn 3:2). Neither was the gospel the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles at the beginning of the day, for it was the mission of the Spirit to glorify the Son, not Himself (Jn 16:14).

Those who exalt miracles and the

Holy Spirit invariably minimize the power of the gospel. Their obsession with miracles and the Spirit diverts their attention away from the power of the incarnational gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Instead of exalting and focusing on the resurrectional ascension and reign of the incarnate Son of God, many obsess over those beliefs or ministries that are important, but not primary. Instead of focusing on the power of the gospel, they are searching for some power in the Holy Spirit to somehow confirm their own faith. We must never forget that the power to both save and transform lives is in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It takes no diploma in theology to know enough about the work of the Holy Spirit to conclude that in His work in our lives, **He would never seek to displace or minimize the transforming power of the gospel of the Son of God.** If He did, then He would fail in His work to glorify the Son (Jn 16:14). Gospel-living Christians must always keep in mind that the Holy Spirit will do His work regardless of our understanding thereof. Though we may not understand all of the Spirit's ministry for the saints, one thing is definitely clear: **The Holy Spirit would never do anything to divert our attention away from the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.** If we would claim that the Spirit must insert in our lives more

power than the gospel, then we have asserted that the power of the gospel to transform lives is limited. It was never Jesus' intention to send the Spirit in order to subsidize the power of the life-transforming gospel.

The personal ministries that later came into the organic function of the church was not the message of the apostles on Pentecost. Later discussions in the epistles that emphasized corrections in dysfunctional behavior between the disciples was not the message. When churches become sectarian, and thus competitive for members, they often use their uniqueness as a message to "convert" others to their particular sect. But the uniqueness that later characterized many autonomous groups of Christianity was not the message of Peter and the apostles. That which cuts religious people of faith to the heart was the message of the gospel of King Jesus. This was the apostles' message to the Pentecost audience.

We cannot overemphasize this point for many have used the epistles to construct a systematic theology that has become their identity, and subsequently, their evangelistic "gospel" message. Their supposed doctrinal purity is used to approach other religious people in order to convert them to one's own particular sect. A theological message has thus replaced gospel preaching.

The crucifixion of God's gospel Messenger in the flesh was not a subpoint of the apostles' message. Because the cross was in the eternal plan of God, it was the core of the gospel message (At 2:23). "*But God raised Him up,*" was the confirming proof that Jesus Christ was the One about whom the prophets had spoken. And not only the resurrection, but there was an ascension to the throne of David in fulfillment of promises to David that One would reign upon his throne of authority (At 2:25-32). And then Peter revealed more: "*This Jesus God has raised up, ... being exalted at the right hand of God*" (At 2:32,33). "*Therefore, let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this same Jesus whom you have crucified, both Lord and Christ*" (At 2:36).

We must keep in mind the spiritual situation of those who heard this first announcement of the gospel. These were the "elite" of the representatives of the Jews' religion. They knew their Old Testaments better than most people today. But when Peter was making these statements about the Man whom God had miraculously proved to be the One who fulfilled over three hundred Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah/Christ of Israel, they were overwhelmed. They were stunned.

Isaiah 53, Psalm 22, and a host

of other prophecies concerning the Suffering Servant of Isaiah became reality. They did not need to return to their synagogues after Pentecost in order that a Rabbi read again to them the picture that God had painted for Israel throughout 1,400 years of history. They could quote all the prophecies by memory, for they were all as the two men on the road to Emmaus. The One that God said He would send was beyond the misguided hope of a restoration of national Israel. He was the One who "*was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement of our peace was upon Him. And with His stripes we are healed*" (Is 53:5).

The Jews' murderous tragedy was turned to grief because they realized that they had become servants of Satan to lay the stripes on the back of the Suffering Servant by delivering Him over to the Romans for crucifixion. There were certainly tears of grief as they mourned over their participation of laying the stripes on the One who was sent to restore them again to an eternal fellowship with the God they had worshiped since before the days of Abraham.

"Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart" (At 2:37).

This is the emotional impact that the gospel should have on every sincere

heart. If it does not, then one either does not understand the gospel, or he understands, but with a hardened heart, walks away. In walking away he has judged himself unfit for eternal dwelling in the presence of the loving God who gave His Son for them. He does not, therefore, know God.

4 WRONG RESPONSES

In order to understand what cut to the heart of the religious people of faith on Pentecost, we must understand what the focus was of the message that was presented. Something that they heard mournfully moved them to respond to the apostolic messengers with the question, “*Men and brethren, what will we do?*” (At 2:37).

It is interesting to note that they did not respond with the question, “What **should** we do?” There was desperation in their question as to what would deliver them out of their predicament of having participated in the crucifixion of the One for whom they and their fathers had waited for centuries. They realized that they were the instruments through whom Satan had worked to have the heel of the Seed of woman bruised (Gn 3:15). Though Peter explained that their actions were in harmony with the pre-determined plan of God to take His Son to the sacrificial cross, they real-

ized that according to prophecy they went wrong in aiding and abetting the crucifixion of an innocent man. But why did they mournfully respond in such a manner to the point that about 3,000 obeyed the gospel on that some day?

In answer to this question, we are encouraged to go forward in time about thirty years to another similar “Bible class” in Rome. But before we go there, consider Luke’s historical statement of what happened immediately after Peter’s statement that they repent and be baptized: “*And with many other words he [Peter] testified and exhorted, saying, ‘Save yourselves from this perverse generation’*” (At 2:40).

We can assume that there could not have been “many other words” since we would have to include on this same day the actual baptism of about 3,000 people. What we infer from the statement is that the apostles spoke more on the subject of the prophets in reference to the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Man from Galilee. And because they had crucified the One who would deliver them out of this world, Peter reaffirmed that Jesus was the only way out.

We assume this from the words “testified” and “exhorted.” Peter’s testimony was that this Jesus, who was proved to be from God both through miraculous wonders and His

resurrection, was indeed the fulfillment of all Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. Convincing the multitude that Jesus was the fulfillment of all prophecies concerning the Messiah was Peter's means by which he exhorted the people to obey the gospel in order to escape the perverseness of this world.

Peter reminded the people that the "*promise [of the Savior] is to you [Jews] and to your children, and to all [the world of Gentiles] who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself [through the gospel - 2 Th 2:14]*" (At 2:39). They were the perverse generation from which they could be delivered in fulfillment of the promise.

Many years after the Pentecost event, Paul went forth into all the world in order to call both Jews and Gentiles unto God through his preaching of the gospel. Acts 28:23-28 is a similar occasion to that which transpired in the Pentecost of Acts 2, but the location was in Rome about thirty years later. Luke recorded of the occasion:

*And when they [the Jews] had appointed him [Paul] a day, many came to him at his lodging, to whom he explained and testified of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the **Law of Moses and the Prophets**, from morning until evening.*

The occasion of Paul's "explaining" and "testifying" was similar to that of Pentecost in Acts 2. With the Jews who assembled before him in Rome, Paul did the same as the apostles in reference to what they knew of the Old Testament prophecies. Paul did not present a doctrinal discourse on the "New Testament church." **His resource was the Law of Moses and the Prophets.** From these two resources he explained how the prophecies pointed to the ascension of the "One like unto the Son of Man" ascending unto the Ancient of Days, whereupon there was given Him dominion, glory and kingdom reign (Dn 2:44; 7:13,14). On the occasion of this all-day meeting Paul certainly emphasized the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, and the One who cried out in agony about being forsaken (Ps 22). All his discussion was in reference to "*persuading them concerning Jesus*" as the One about whom the prophets spoke (At 28:23).

Paul's discussions with the Jews of Rome centered around Jesus being the fulfillment of all prophecies of the Messiah in order to prove that Jesus was the One. Peter's exhortation to the Pentecost audience thirty years before was for the same purpose. And during His final days with His disciples between the resurrection and ascension, Jesus schooled the remaining eleven apostles in the fact that He

was the fulfillment of all that was written in the law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Him (Lk 24:44).

And upon consideration of the people who were in Jerusalem at the time, Peter's reference to the "perverse generation" may refer directly to the perverse religious generation of the Jews. We often want the reference to refer to the "perverse Romans" among them. But we must not forget that it was the "perverse religionists" who used the Romans to crucify our Savior. It was a murderous religion by which they were deceived by the leaders thereof to turn Jesus over to the Romans. It was indeed a perverse religion with blind leaders who led the blind to cry out, "Crucify Him!"

The focus of Jesus, Peter and Paul was to direct our attention to who Jesus was and what was prophesied that He would be for the world. They did not confuse those to whom they spoke concerning teachings of the "true church." They simply preached gospel in prophecy. Their teaching was not centered around prophecies concerning the "end of times," but prophecy that an end of the prophecies in the Lord Jesus Christ in time.

Those whose message is primarily about end-of-times speculation in reference to those who live today have missed the gospel that was prophesied

by the prophets. They excite people about their future fantasies in order to encourage people to come to Jesus because of fear. They have thus missed the gospel of love about which the prophets in the Old Testament spoke. They miss the loving-kindness (grace) of God that was illustrated in God's patience with Israel in order to bring the Messiah into the world.

Because Jesus, Peter and Paul applied the Old Testament prophecies to Jesus as the Messiah, we can understand better Jesus' ministry of teaching in reference to the gospel that He was revealing during His earthly ministry. As the Messiah, He was the origin of the gospel, as well as the One who would implement in the world the gospel through His death, resurrection and ascension. Notice what Jesus said to His audiences: "*For if you do not believe that **I am He**, you will die in your sins*" (Jn 8:24). "*When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that **I am He***" (Jn 8:28). "*Now I tell you before it comes, so that when it comes to pass you may believe that **I am He***" (Jn 13:19).

So John concluded his "gospel of John" concerning why he recorded the signs that confirmed Jesus to be the One: "*These are written so that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ [Messiah], the Son of God, and that believing you might have life*

through His name” (Jn 20:31).

Now we should understand that when idolatrous people in the first century initially asked what they must do to be saved, the answer to their question was obvious: **“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you and your household will be saved”** (At 16:31). John said to **“the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Jesus”** (At 19:4). Believing on Jesus was only the beginning of one’s journey into Christ. If one stopped at a simple, unresponsive faith, then he would remain spiritually dead in his sins.

The beginning of one’s obedience to the gospel starts with the One who revealed and enacted the gospel. Believing on Jesus did not make one a disciple without obedience to the gospel. It only gave one a right to become a child of God. **“But as many as received [believed on] Him, to them He gave the right to become the children of God, even to those who believe in His name”** (Jn 1:12). “Having the right” does not make one a child of God. Belief only gives one the right to continue on the road to God’s righteousness that is in Christ. Belief should encourage one to look further down the road to what God instructs concerning our opportunity to become His child.

5 THE RIGHT CUT

What disturbs us today is that the message of many religious leaders throughout the world has shifted from gospel to the promotion of those things that promote religion. If included, the gospel has been relegated to an “invitation” at the end of an oration on social relationships or doctrinal purity. Since it is assumed that the Bible is specifically about us, then from Genesis to Revelation the content of the word of God is used primarily to address dysfunctional relationships, whether in family, between friends, or in our communities.

The Bible certainly speaks on such matters, but we must not forget that the entire Bible is first about Jesus and the gospel. It is God’s road map to explain how He brought His Son into the world because He so loved the world. Upon initial obedience to the gospel, the Bible is about continuing gospel living throughout our lives.

We use the Bible to correct our behavior in reference to our obedience to the gospel. We must continually remind ourselves that the Bible focuses on encouraging us to walk according to that which we have obeyed. Paul explained this in the following words: **“As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him”** (Cl 2:6). **“If you then were**

raised with Christ, seek those things that are above, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God” (Cl 3:1). “Therefore, if you died with Christ from the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourselves to [religious] ordinances?” (Cl 2:20).

In many cases, our message has changed because our focus has been diverted from Jesus to ourselves. It has changed from focusing on Jesus to focusing on our own special needs. And in our confrontation with sectarian religion, the message has changed from Jesus and the gospel to winning doctrinal arguments with those with whom we disagree.

In view of these changes, therefore, we feel that the following points should be considered, for these points clarify the message of the apostles to the Pentecost audience. About 3,000 people were cut to the heart on that Pentecost. Unfortunately, we often assume that something other than the gospel moved the people to respond to the message of the apostles.

6 CRY FREEDOM!

The Pentecost audience was not cut to the heart because they realized that they were following a legal system of law that God no longer considered valid.

It is true that the Sinai law was

nailed to the cross (Cl 2:14). Christians are dead to the Sinai law through their obedience to the gospel (Rm 7:1-4). They are dead to the old law and covenant simply because in His coming, Jesus introduced a new covenant and law (Hb 9:15; 10:5-9; 12:24).

We must not forget that those whom the apostles addressed on Pentecost were caught up in something different than the Sinai law. They were in bondage to the Jews’ religion. The original Sinai law had been blanketed with a host of traditions. So many traditions had been added to the Sinai law that its original intent was obscured by those who rejected the law in order to keep their traditions (Mk 7:1-9). The address of the apostles to their audience, therefore, was an address to traditional religionists, specifically, the religion of the Jews (Gl 1:14).

If we suppose that the Pentecost audience was moved by the preaching of another system of religious law, then we have missed the point of the gospel of grace. Honest people of faith under the Sinai law knew that it was impossible to keep law perfectly in order to self-justify oneself before God (See Gl 2:16). Those who stood before the apostles had for centuries involved themselves in a religious legal system of law-keeping that had digressed into self-righteous sanctification. They supposed that they could

keep the law perfectly if they added numerous other religious rites to the Sinai law. The Sinai law, plus all the added religious rites, composed the Jews' religion, or Judaism. This was actually the very system of religion that drove these honest, but frustrated people of faith, to the gospel of freedom that was preached by the apostles.

In reference to some who were tempted to return to a religious system of law, sin and death, Paul asked them a question and answered it perfectly: "*Therefore, why then the [Sinai] law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed should come to whom the promise was made*" (Gl 3:19). But when the Seed (Jesus) came, the necessity for perfect law-keeping was gone. Grace displaced self-righteous religion. Those who understand this are not tempted to turn Christianity into a system of self-righteous religion.

When honest and sincere people are confronted with law, law provokes mourning only over one's inability to keep it perfectly. The Sinai law thus drove the Pentecost audience to grace because they understood that their attempts to keep law perfectly did not produce any satisfaction of being justified before God. Their obedience was always imperfect because we are all lawbreakers (Rm 3:9,10,23).

But there was more to the gos-

pel than one's self-realization of being a lawbreaker. The gospel of grace was not another legal system of law that would continue to frustrate those who sincerely wanted to be close to God, but were barred from such because of law and sin. The atonement of the cross was God's signal to His creation that we could fulfill the intended purpose for which we were created. The cross was a restored union (fellowship) between God and man for eternity.

The gospel was a message from the heart of God through His only begotten Son in order that the "tree of life" once again be restored to a world from which we were driven (See Gn 3:22-24). On Pentecost, the audience realized that they had, through the crucifixion, actually crucified their opportunity for eternal life. Since the One they had crucified was the Messiah who revealed the heart of God, all those Old Testament prophetic descriptions of the Suffering Servant of God struck them directly in their hearts. Their being "cut to the heart" was more than feeling guilty over crucifying an innocent man. They realized that the innocent man was the Man.

The apostles did not preach another system of law, but freedom from sin through the crucified heart of God. They preached freedom through the gospel of Jesus by which all religion-

ists can be delivered from sin. And once delivered, about twenty years after the Pentecost message, Paul reminded all former Jewish religionists, *“Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage”* (Gl 5:1).

7 FREEDOM FROM LEGALISM

The Pentecost audience was not cut to the heart because of a legal command to be baptized.

It is certainly right to teach that one must be baptized for the remission of sins. We could refer to numerous passages throughout the New Testament that record commands and cases of those who were baptized (Mt 28:19,20; Mk 16:15,16). But the motivation to respond in obedience to the gospel through baptism, was not the apostles’ initial message that cut to the heart the audience on Pentecost. In our zeal to encourage people to be baptized for remission of sins—that is necessary—we have sometimes overlooked that which should cut one to the heart in order that he or she be motivated to be immersed into Christ. In Peter’s message, there was “cutting” before there was mention of baptism.

Baptism (obedience to the gospel) was the only answer to the problem the Pentecost audience had just realized. If they had initially heard

all that was to be included in the preaching of Jesus, then certainly they would have taken the initiative that the Ethiopian eunuch did when he heard the same preaching of Jesus, *“See, here is water! What hinders me from being baptized?”* (At 8:36).

Preaching the message of the gospel includes how one must connect with the cleansing blood of the cross. However, obedience in baptism is not the primary motivation. The gospel of Jesus is the sinner’s primary motivation. Therefore, if one does not call for water upon hearing the gospel, then he or she has either not understood the gospel, or he or she has understood, but walked away from the heart of God.

On the Pentecost occasion of Acts 2, Peter said nothing about baptism in the initial message that cut the audience to the heart. If we suppose that a legal command to be baptized should cut one to the heart, then we have subsidized with a legal command the power of the gospel message. Peter did not mention the command to obey the gospel (baptism) until he had preached the gospel. The command to repent and be baptized followed the message of the gospel that cut them to the heart, but was not the gospel. The fact that about 3,000 were cut to the heart by the gospel proved that their obedience to the gospel was genuine (At 2:41).

When sincere people respond to the gospel of grace, they are not looking for another legal system of law to obey. With the Pentecost audience, law was the problem. Law revealed their inability to keep law perfectly, and thus, they were in sin. It is for this reason that the religious legalist misses the point in reference to baptism. Baptism is a necessary response to the gospel of grace. When the Pentecost repentant asked, “What will we do,” they wanted answers from God. If the answer to repent and be baptized was a law from the apostles’ religious ingenuity, then it would have been the construction of another legal system of religion to which we must conform. But the fact that they accepted “repent and be baptized” as instructions from God, they responded to God, not men.

But why is the gospel message inseparably linked to baptism in obedience to the gospel? Paul made the connection in Romans 3: “*Do we then make void law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish law*” (Rm 3:31). **If one’s faith in the gospel leads to the cutting of the heart, then the evidence of the “cutting” is one’s obedience to the gospel in baptism.** If there is no call for water, then the one who has heard the gospel is either hardened, or simply too immature to truly understand the sacrificial offering of

the incarnate Son of God on the cross of Calvary. If the situation is the latter, then he or she is not at the age of accountability. (We must be careful about baptizing young people who are too immature to understand the gospel of the incarnational offering of the Son of God.)

Those who are moved by faith to ask, “What will we do,” are not looking for another law-keeping system by which they can legally self-justify themselves before God. Neither are they looking for another system of self-righteous religious traditionalism wherein they could possibly self-sanctify themselves in obedience to religious rites and ceremonies (See Rm 10:1-3).

Self-sanctifying law-keeping religion was the background of the Pentecost audience. Upon their arrival to Jerusalem for the feast, it was all they knew in order to please God. When the apostles preached the gospel of grace, they were probably somewhat confused, if not overwhelmed. They had tried law-keeping and that failed. The message of the gospel, therefore, moved them to ask for instructions from God, not man. They were not looking for another legal system of law, for their inability to keep the Jews’ law perfectly had moved them by faith to look for another way. This is the appeal of the gospel. Therefore, when God re-

sponds with “repent and be baptized,” gospel-repentant people who have been cut to the heart by the gospel establish God’s will in their lives through their obedience to the gospel in baptism.

Because baptism (obedience to the gospel) was from God, then it was not only for remission of sins, but also for freedom from law. It was not another law, obedience to which produced an assumed legal self-sanctifying remission of sins. In obedience to the gospel that sets us free from religion (traditional laws of men), one’s obedience also sets one free from both sin and that which is the occasion for sin ... law. It is in obedience to the gospel (baptism) that one connects with the blood of Jesus, and thus is rendered forgiveness of sins by God.

If baptism were just another law to be obeyed, then the one being baptized would be legally working for his own remission of sins. His legal obedience to be baptized would be an effort on his part to keep law in order to be set free from the necessity of keeping law perfectly. But because baptism is the correct response to the gospel. The action of baptism is a signal of faith in Christ, and thus, the blood of Christ goes to work in the sinner’s life at the point of baptism.

Baptism is not a work. The only work involved in one’s baptism is God’s work to forgive the baptized

believer all his or her sins. This is the foundational meaning of what the Holy Spirit later revealed in writing to those Christians in Rome: “*For sin will not have dominion over you, for you are not under law, but under grace [gospel]*” (Rm 6:14). One is baptized, not to be under law, but under grace. In obedience to the gospel in baptism one is freed from law that brings death, for in baptism one connects with the grace of God.

We previously stated that there has often been a change of emphasis in the preaching of the word of God to unbelievers in these modern times. We have mentioned some major diversions that have sidetracked some from the gospel. We could list a host of subjects that people promote today in order to sidetrack people from obedience to the gospel. Some promote ceremonial legalities or vibrant concert assemblies as the main attraction. Some have been very clever to present their assemblies as a Hollywood attraction in order to inspire people to come to Jesus. The apostles used none of these promotional gimmicks.

Some have asserted that they have the right form for the Lord’s Supper during an assembly. On Pentecost, the apostles mentioned nothing concerning the Supper. But if we promote the Supper as a ceremonial law of assembly, then our observance

of the Supper becomes self-contradictory. It becomes such if we promote a self-sanctifying observance that must be legally performed as law. If we celebrate the Supper in such a manner, then we are legally observing it according to our own self-imposed law. But because the Supper is about celebrating our freedom from law and sin that we have received through the gospel of Jesus, then in the Supper we celebrate freedom from law and sin because of the gospel of freedom. We must remember that on Pentecost the apostles said nothing about the Supper in order to cut the people to the heart. After their obedience to the gospel, the early Christians were moved to observe the Supper in order to remember Jesus who opened the door into the gospel.

In their initial presentation of the gospel, the apostles said nothing about the Holy Spirit. In fact, lest the Holy Spirit steal the show on the Pentecost occasion, He showed up on the apostles before the preaching began. And in order that there be no confusion concerning those upon whom He came, there appeared “tongues as of fire” that indicated each apostle whom He baptized with the truth of the gospel (At 2:3). Therefore, the apostles’ initial gospel message was not a promise to be baptized in the Holy Spirit, or to speak in tongues (languages) as they did when they were

baptized in the Spirit at the beginning of the day. Only after the mournful response to the preaching of the gospel was there any reference made to the Holy Spirit. Peter’s promise was that those who were cut to the heart would receive the “gift of the Holy Spirit” when they were baptized (At 2:38). The work of the Spirit on this occasion was in view of what Jesus, during His ministry, had spoken concerning the work of the Spirit: “*He will glorify Me*” (Jn 16:14). It was never the work of the Holy Spirit to cut people to the heart. This was the gospel business of Jesus, not the Spirit.

There were no churches to join on Pentecost, so the people were not given the option of “joining the church of their choice.” There was no name of the church under which the audience could call themselves. There were no outlines on “church doctrine” to pass out to the people. There was no “church house” where they were to show up on the Sunday after. Since they were visitors to Jerusalem for the Passover/Pentecost feast, most of the people had no friends in Jerusalem who could usher them to the “front pew.”

The people responded only to the gospel, and in obedience to this gospel God added them to new friends (At 2:47). Their common fellowship thereafter was centered around Jesus.

And thus, we are reminded of what John wrote thirty years later to another audience on a different occasion:

That which was from the beginning, that we have heard, that we have seen with our eyes, that we have looked upon and our hands have handled, we proclaim concerning the Word of Life (1 Jn 1:1).

And that was the message thirty years before on the Pentecost of A.D. 30. That simple revelation was enough to cut people to the heart. It is still enough to convict hearts today when the gospel is preached around the world.

8 RESPONSIVE FAITH

The problem we have in the religious world today is that people often respond to Jesus with the wrong motives, or for the wrong purposes. The result is that wrong motives and purposes produce wrong results. It is as Simon the sorcerer. He was baptized as others in the city of Samaria. But his motives for coming into the fellowship of the saints were wrong, for he thought that he could regain his pompous position in the community by having others come to him in order that he lay his hands on them to receive the Holy Spirit (At 8:19,20).

When we promote church heri-

tage or “pastoral positions” as a motivation to join the church of one’s particular choice, then the heritage of the religious group is perpetuated and the gospel becomes an inconsequential motivation. When there is a new recruit solicited with success, new convert classes are taught in order to bring the new converts into conformity to the doctrines that perpetuate each particular religious sect. Traditions that identify the heritage of the group, not the gospel, become the foundation for the existence of each particular religious group. And since the heritage of each religious sect is perpetuated through the leaders who supervise the flock, then there is competition for leadership within each group as in the case of Simon. If Simon had his way, he would have willingly established the “Church of Simon” in Samaria.

When a legal system of theology becomes the identity of any particular religious group, then legal systems of doctrine become the message of the group. People then preach church and not gospel. Since the “identity” of the group is legally based, then the gospel is lost as the primary motivation among the members. Legalities are subsequently preached in order to bring people into conformity with “church law.” Law, not gospel, thus becomes the foundation upon which each particular religious group is built and defined. Arguments in the group

are often centered around law, not Jesus Christ. And for this reason, “issues” become very important within legally-defined sects.

And then there are those groups who seek to build their religion on Jesus, but they cheapen the gospel through a simple confession that Jesus is “their personal Savior.” They forget that it is the gospel that generates faith, as it did with those on Pentecost. And when faith is generated by the gospel, then obedience naturally follows when one acknowledges the heart of God through the offering of His incarnate Son. We must not forget that the Son of God introduced the gospel of grace through His incarnational offering. Since He was God in the flesh, He made available through the cross all that God has for us in order to bring us into eternity with Him.

John wrote in order “*that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you might have life*” (Jn 20:31). There is a subjunctive in this statement that people often miss. John recorded the miracles that confirmed Jesus to be the Christ and Son of God. The purpose for recording this miraculous confirmation was to produce belief in the minds of the readers. The result was that those who believed **might** have eternal life. The passage does not say that they will have eternal life

if they simply believe. The word “might” assumes that there are some conditions to be fulfilled in order that one have eternal life.

This was the case on Pentecost. The people were led to believe in Jesus because of the preaching of the gospel that was revealed through Jesus who was “*a Man approved by God among you by miracles and wonders and signs that God did through Him in your midst*” (At 2:22). However, the people felt no security in their initial belief that Jesus was actually Lord and Christ. As a result of their belief, they were cut to the heart and asked what to do in order that they might find a solution for their rejection of Jesus. Their belief produced mourning, not relief. When the gospel produces belief, then people must be instructed what to do in order to find relief for their mourning over sin. In the case of Pentecost, the people were instructed to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins (At 2:38). In this obedience to the gospel they were baptized into Christ where there is eternal life (2 Tm 2:10). Belief produced remorse over sins, but obedience to the gospel in baptism produced relief from sin.

A Philippian jailor was once inspired by the gospel living of two disciples in a Roman dungeon, the most unlikely place for two people to be singing gospel praises to God (At

16:25). But when the jailor was shaken by an earthquake, he asked the two gospel-obedient disciples, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (At 16:30). So what would be the **first** thing an idolatrous religionist be told to do to be saved? He had already heard about Jesus through the teaching of the gospel through song (See Ep 5:19). So the two evangelists instructed, “*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you and your household will be saved*” (At 16:30).

Belief is the foundation upon which one identifies that he understands that salvation depends on the Lord Jesus Christ. The jailor was not taught a system of theology in order to be saved. He was not asked to memorize a list of scriptures. He was not instructed in “scriptural assemblies.” Neither was he given an outline of doctrine of the “true church.” The gospel was the center of his belief, and thus the motivation that provoked Him to respond to the Lord Jesus Christ. And so that same hour of the night his belief was turned into action as God through the Lord Jesus Christ went into action for him at the cross (At 16:33). If we assume that belief in the gospel is sufficient for one to be saved apart from obedience to the gospel, then the belief is cheap. It is as James said ... a dead faith! (Js 2:26).

Jesus would say the following to

those “believers” who do not the will of the Father: “*Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed in Him, ‘If you continue in My word, then you are truly My disciples. And you will know the truth [of the gospel], and the truth [of the gospel] will make you free*” (Jn 8:31,32). It is not belief alone that sets one free. It is the gospel. It is obedience to the gospel that inspires us to continue in the word of God. In obedience to the gospel in baptism one is set free from sin in order to begin a new gospel life in Christ.

If one would seek to trust in his own belief, without obedience, **then his salvation is based on himself, not the gospel.** Belief is from within an individual. Gospel is something that was done for us two thousand years ago. For this reason, cheap belief cannot be substituted for obedience to the gospel in reference to our salvation. It cannot because “faith only” cannot be an easy way out of joining with Jesus on the cross, in the tomb, and in a resurrection that we might walk with Him in newness of life (See Rm 6:3-6).

9 GOSPEL VERSUS SELF

When people hear and obey the gospel of Jesus, they do not respond with hopes of getting something, but in getting rid of something. And that

which they seek to rid themselves of is self and sin. In answer to the people on Pentecost being cut to the heart because the message of the gospel that convicted them, there was only one answer that Peter could give. They had to relinquish themselves to the sin-washing blood of Jesus (At 2:38). This was the answer that Ananias gave to Saul when he too was convicted by the loving heart of God for him through Jesus: *“And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized **and wash away your sins**, calling on the name of the Lord”* (At 22:16).

Those who seek to come to Jesus with narcissistic (self-centered) attitudes will never find the cross of self-sacrifice. The self-oriented person has a difficult time accepting the selfless Jesus on the cross. The religious narcissist is like the Pharisee who *“stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not as other men ...’* (Lk 18:11). Those who are cut to the heart because they have realized the futility of their own self-righteous religiosity will be as the tax collector who revealed his contrite spirit by not standing forward with a presumptuous attitude. The one who has been cut to the heart with the gospel will respond to the gospel while beating his chest, and saying, *“God be merciful to me a sinner!”* (Lk 18:13).

There was a great deal of chest beating on the day of Pentecost, for

the gospel beats out of us our presumptuous self-righteousness. Self-righteousness moves us to think that we can see. It makes us feel comfortable in our religiosity. When Jesus spoke of the religious leaders of Israel, the Pharisees, He identified them as we fail to define ourselves in our self-deception of religion: *“They are blind leaders of the blind”* (Mt 15:14). The problem with the self-righteous is that *“they being ignorant of God’s righteousness and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God”* (Rm 10:3).

The problem with religion is that it always blinds one to his or her need for the sanctification of the gospel blood that flows from the cross. When one feels self-sanctified in his own religious performances, he feels little need for the sanctification of the gospel. But of the blind, Jesus continued, *“Woe to you blind guides ... fools and blind men”* (Mt 23:16,17). When we think we can find our own way, the gospel says no way.

We must never forget that religion blinds the religionists, and the one who is a blind religious leader, continues to lead his blinded followers to destruction (Lk 6:39). The blinded are so led because they do not have a love for the truth of the gospel (2 Th 2:10-12). Religion inspires one to think that he spiritually sees, but

he is actually blinded by his own self-righteous religiosity. Religion distorts our spectacles through which we seek to see clearly the gospel of Jesus.

The gospel makes the honest and sincere realize that he or she is blinded in self-righteous religiosity. Gospel digs deep into our hearts in order to convict us of our total inability to make ourselves right before God. What Peter preached on the day of Pentecost opened the eyes of those honest religionists who for all their lives thought that they could see through their legal Jewish religion. But when they were confronted with the gospel of the sacrificed incarnate Son of God, the truth was revealed that they were struggling in the futility of religious self-justification according to law and religious traditions of Judaism. They then realized their struggle and the burden of Judaism. Their only response could be, "What will we do?"

The Pentecost audience realized that they needed to do something, for they finally understood that their own self-sanctifying Judaism could not give them freedom from sin and bring them into fellowship with God. In fact, Peter's message of the gospel revealed that it was adherence to their religious leaders that encouraged them to crucify the Hope of Israel. They realized that for too long they had followed the way of the religious

leaders when they should have been following the way of God.

The gospel makes us realize that the more intense we practice the rites of our religion, the further we move away from God. In order to protect the religion of their heritage (Judaism), the people to whom Peter and the apostles spoke on Pentecost were about six weeks before, driven by their religious leaders to crucify the One whom they considered to be a rebel against Judaism. But the very One who was sent by God into the world to show the way to freedom from their futile efforts of self-sanctifying religiosity, and to bring them again into fellowship with the God of love, was crucified at their will. We can only imagine the shock that went through their souls as they stood there that day convicted of their crime against their only hope of being delivered from themselves.

10 FREEDOM FOR CAPTIVES

Gospel makes one realize the predicament of our own religious inability. It took the Holy Spirit two books of inspired instruction to bring the Jewish Christians out of the quagmire of their former religion of self-justification through works. In Romans He focused on our need for grace. *"For if by the offense of one many died, much more the grace of*

God and the gift by grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many” (Rm 5:15). “And if by grace [we are saved], then it is no more by works [of self-righteous religion]” (Rm 11:6).

In Galatians the Holy Spirit focused on the futility of religious self-justification. In both books (Romans and Galatians), the gospel was the only answer to man’s dilemma of being unable to be reconciled before God. At the time the books were written, some tried to bring into their gospel living their self-sanctifying works. But in doing so, they ended up with a mixture of religion that was more dangerous than idolatrous paganism. It was thus “another gospel” wherein some Judaizing teachers thought they would graft together law-keeping circumcision and other religious rites, with the true gospel of freedom in Christ. In doing so they thought that they could enjoy the benefits of the gospel of grace, but at the same time, carry on with some of the self-sanctifying traditions of their religious heritage (See Gl 1:6-9). But the Holy Spirit concluded the end of their efforts with the words, “*You have been severed from Christ, you who seek to be justified by law. You have fallen from grace*” (Gl 5:4).

And herein is the curse of religion. There are religious people throughout the world today who teach

the gospel of Jesus, but stack on the gospel a host of religious rites, divisive names and titles, religious heritages, and ceremonies. All such religious law-keeping burdens are stacked under a favorite name to identify each particular sect. The result is that adherents to each religion are led about by the blind religious leaders who are schooled in the rites of each autonomous sect. Seminaries prepare diploma-certified gatekeepers to perpetuate the religion while all the adherents march to the tune of being faithful to the unique heritage of skilled pulpiteers.

It can only be the preaching of the simple gospel of the cross, resurrection, ascension and reign of King Jesus that will deliver us from the bondage of our own religiosity. The gospel of Christ produces only Christians, not some favorite brand of Christian. It may be comfortable to live in the security of the religion of one’s heritage, but those on the Pentecost Sunday of Acts 2 realized that the Jews’ religion of their heritage was a futile attempt of self-sanctification before God. They realized that their religion needed to be swept away through the light of the gospel of Jesus who paid the price for all of us in order that we be redeemed once again into the fellowship of a loving God.

When we finally understand the gospel of the God who “so loved the

world through His Son,” then we will easily fill our souls with more of Him and less of ourselves. It is the gospel that opens the door for us to fall in love with God, because He first loved us. And when we fall in love with God through the gospel of Jesus, then it is only natural to fall in love with the lost whom we seek to bring into the fellowship of the God of love. When we see sincere and honest people in the bondage of religion we are driven to them with the gospel of liberation. It is for this reason that those who are not seeking to preach the love of God to the lost, have lost their love of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. True gospel-obedient believers can identify those who are in the bondage of religion. Subsequently, true gospel-obedient disciples of Jesus are driven by love to set the captives free. Such was the mission of Jesus: “*When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive ...*” (Ep 4:8).

11 GOSPEL RELATIONSHIPS

There is a vast difference between the relational fellowship of the saints of God and those of a religious social club. The revelation of this difference lies at the heart of 1 John 1:3:

That which [the incarnational Son of God] we have seen and heard we

declare to you so that you also may have fellowship with us, and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.

This is the biblical definition of our relationship with God and with one another. John prefaced this statement with the declaration of the incarnational Word:

For the life was manifested and we have seen and bear witness and show to you that eternal life that was with the Father and was manifested to us (1 Jn 1:2).

John wanted to focus the attention of his readers on the “incarnational Word” with which he had commenced his epistle:

That which was from the beginning, that we have heard, that we have seen with our eyes, that we have looked [Gr., gazed] upon and our hands have handled, we proclaim concerning the Word of Life (1 Jn 1:1).

A more clear statement in any language could not have been made that explains the fellowship (relationship) of the saints with God and one another. The saints’ relationship with one another is a fellowship that is based on the gospel fact that “*in the beginning was the Word ... and the*

Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:1,14). And since all the saints have obeyed the gospel of this incarnate Word, then He, not ourselves, is always the foundation of our relationships with one another. There can be no other better foundation for true Christian relationships.

Christians are drawn together because of their common obedience to the incarnational offering of the Word of Life on the cross, His burial for our hope, resurrection, and His present reign over all things. Connection (fellowship) with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit through our common obedience to this gospel is what establishes our relationship with God and one another. Our obedience to the gospel of the incarnational Son of God is the impetus, the foundation, the eternal bond of fellowship that we have with the eternal Word of Life, and thus, the guarantee of living forever in His presence. The Christians' relationships with one another is far beyond the relationship of friendship.

We hear a great deal today about relationships in the religious world. Religions throughout the world have invented every possible stimulus to produce relationships among the members of their respective churches. We have heard on numerous occasions the statement that "Christianity is about relationships." And, it is. However, are the relationships of re-

ligion truly based on the incarnational and resurrected Word of Life that the members have obeyed in their burial and resurrection with the Word of Life? Or, are they manufactured relationships through relational encounters of the members with one another through food, parties and games in order to enhance friendships?

If our relationships with one another are not first based on our obedience to the gospel of the Word of Life, then we will become a religious social club when we come together in those meetings in which we seek to produce friendships. If our relationships are simply fabricated and maintained by the art of human relational fun and games, then the gospel soon passes from being the primary purpose for which we come together with one another. We must remember that the relationships that gospel-obedient Christians have with one another goes far beyond friendships. There is something much deeper in the relationships of gospel-obedient disciples than having "good buddies," or being faithful in attendance at the local church social club.

The bond of the relationships that gospel-obedient disciples have with one another is not initially based on their friendships with one another. John clarified that we have a relationship (fellowship) with one another because of our common obedience to

the gospel of the Word of Life. Paul explained that *“by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body”* (1 Co 12:13). And because baptized disciples are members of one body, they organically function as a body of relational members (See 1 Co 12:15-27).

Cult members have strong relationships with one another. They are driven together because of their great respect for, or fear of, the leader of the cult. Religions often lean toward cultism in the sense that the “pastor” is the attraction of the hour of assembly and center of reference for the faith of the members. Assemblies that are generated and maintained around a dynamic personality can never be the relational fellowship that is so natural with gospel-obedient saints.

Gospel-obedient saints are drawn to one another because of their common obedience of the gospel of the Word of Life. They are relational before they show up at any assembly that is designed to promote relationships. In other words, the relationships that Christians have with one another are divinely generated, not humanly manufactured. If one simply wants to be a co-religionist with other religionists in a common religious social club, then he can simply “join the church of his choice.” But when one joins himself to Jesus through obedience to the gospel, he is added by God

to a family of gospel-obedient disciples (At 2:47).

Religionists assemble in order to experience either a relational or experiential event that would enhance their relationships with one another. But gospel-obedient saints come together in assembly because they have established a relationship (fellowship) with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit through their obedience to the gospel. They were baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit into a covenant relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Mt 28:19). Their motivation for assembly, therefore, is not to establish a greater relationship (fellowship) with one another and God, but to celebrate the fact that they already have a gospel-obedient relationship with one another and God because they have all been baptized into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Their individual addition to the body of members has brought them into a relationship of all gospel-obedient members of the family of God.

It is for this reason that we question the assembly of those who have come together with little desire to celebrate the gospel through the Lord’s Supper. By this we mean that those who assemble on the first day of the week and fail to partake of the communal (fellowship) Supper of the incarnational Word of Life, have either

forgotten, or never established the purpose for which the saints assemble in the first place. If we assemble without the Supper, then we are simply renewing our friendships with one another. Our assembly has become no different than the assembly of the local “Rotary Club,” but in a religious atmosphere. If our purpose is simply to come together with the saints in order to reestablish our relationships, then we have become a religious social club that can celebrate nothing greater than our friendship with one another. If we have come together to fulfill our narcissistic desire to enjoy a Sunday-morning entertainment event, then we have failed to come together for the purpose of honoring the incarnational Son who came in the flesh in order to establish our covenant relationship with Him.

Saints who come together simply to reestablish relationships, experience an emotional event, or simply out of obedience to law, have not yet understood the purpose for the saints’ assembly. If they have lost their way in this matter, then they are not drawn in attendance to the Table of the Lord. Their assembly simply becomes an attendance to a Hollywood experience. If Jesus does not take center stage for our assemblies, then our assemblies have become narcissistic productions in order that we “get something out of the Sunday morning event.” Those

who fail to show up at the Table of the gospel have identified themselves to have lost their motivation by the gospel of Jesus.

The early disciples came together in a relational manner in order to experience together the celebration of the Word of Life. It was this Word that the early apostles handled, touched and gazed upon. Because of their relationship (fellowship) with the Father through the incarnational Son, the saints came together to remember and celebrate the incarnational sacrifice and risen Word who came down out of heaven into this world in order to take us out of this world into heaven. The saints in Ephesus remembered and celebrated this gospel event every first day of the week in a fellowship meal that surrounded the Supper of the Lord (At 20:7).

The “breaking of bread” among the early disciples was a fellowship meal that they enjoyed with one another in their remembrance of the blood and body of the Lord. The Holy Spirit reminded the Corinthian saints that their participation in the feast was a relational (fellowship) experience.

*The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not the **fellowship** of the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not the **fellowship** of the body of Christ? (1 Co 10:16).*

Because of their lack of consideration for one another, the Corinthians started to marginalize, or corrupt the Lord's Supper during this love feast. They turned the "breaking of bread" into a drunken occasion wherein they revealed their inconsiderate relationships for one another. Because their assemblies digressed into pleasing themselves (narcissism), they were not able to celebrate the Lord's Supper that should have revealed their fellowship with the Lord and one another (See 1 Co 11:20,21). In other words, their dysfunctional relationships with one another in assembly revealed that they had a dysfunctional relationship with the One who should always be the center of attraction for every assembly. They had lost their way for coming together for a love feast that should have been an expression of their love for one another (See 1 Co 11-14).

When we produce attractions to stimulate attendance, then our assemblies have moved away from a clear focus on the gospel. When people are not motivated in life by the gospel of Life, something other than the gospel must be the stimulus for them to attend the religious assemblies.

Gospel-obedient saints come together in assembly in order to celebrate the reason why they have a common bond with one another. It is because they have fellowship with

one another through their common obedience to the gospel that they come together in assembly. Every Christian has a relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit because of his or her obedience to the gospel (Rm 6:3-6). And because this relationship has been established by obedience to the gospel, they have a relationship with one another before and after any assemblies.

Christians can come together because they are good friends. But their relationships with one another in friendship never has priority over their friendship with Jesus through their obedience to the gospel. In fact, the friendship (relationship) of Christians is based on Jesus, not simply on a relational acquaintance they might have with one another as neighbors in a community.

Those religious groups that minimized the observance of the Lord's Supper in their assemblies have lost their way, if indeed they ever knew the way to a gospel covenant relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit through baptism into Christ. Because they have not focused on obedience to the gospel, their assemblies have often become narcissistic Hollywood productions, religious parties as the situation in Corinth, or simply the observance of ceremonial rituals that bring some comfort to those who are ridden with guilt.

Unless the gospel is preached and obeyed, assemblies will always be religious ceremonial exercises or concert experiences. Unless the gospel of the incarnational Son of God is restored as the center of reference for assembly, the attendees will never realize the worshipful experience that results from an assembly that is focused totally on the resurrected and reigning Son of God who first brought them together in their common obedience to the gospel.

12 ATTACKING THE GOSPEL

If a Christian forsakes, or distorts in any way any part of the gospel, then he has delivered a death blow to the very heart of the existence of Christianity. If he remains religious in his attack, then he has turned away from being Christian to being a self-sanctifying religionist. If any part of the gospel message is either questioned, or denied, or disobeyed, then one leaves or distorts the very purpose for which the Son of God came into the world to reveal the gospel—to seek and to save the lost (Lk 19:10). If such attacks are made against the heart of the gospel, then one will lose his way as a disciple of the Son of God. In fact, he will simply cease being a disciple of the One who revealed the gospel to the world.

The Holy Spirit knew that such

an apostasy would happen among some Christians in various areas of the world throughout history. He thus prepared some specific recorded cases in the New Testament where there were attacks made against the heart of the gospel. He recorded why and how some would lose their way, and thus cease to be witnesses in their communities that Jesus was the Christ and Son of the living God (See Mt 16:16-18).

While the apostles were still alive, there were some Christians who cut away part of the core of the gospel message. They were “*saying that the resurrection is already past*” (2 Tm 2:18). And by promoting this teaching, “*they overthrow the faith of some*” (2 Tm 2:18). The denial of the resurrection was one reason why Paul was on his way to Corinth. He was headed to the city in order to cut out of the fellowship of the church of God those who became arrogant and who attacked the gospel by denying the resurrection (See 2 Co 1:23; 10:1-18; 13:2,10).

There were those among the Corinthians who believed that the dead would not be resurrected. But if this were true, then why, Paul argues, would we ever be baptized in order to bury the old dead man of sin (1 Co 15:29)? Why would one be baptized to bury the old man of sin, if we in the future will not be raised to join

Christ in eternal life (See Rm 6:3-6).

It was not coincidental, therefore, that Paul began 1 Corinthians 15—the New Testament chapter on the resurrection—with a brief definition of the heart of the gospel:

For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures (1 Co 15:3,4).

In obedience to the gospel, we connect with the atoning blood of Jesus when we are crucified with Him in repentance before being buried with Him in the waters of baptism (Rm 6:4). We are subsequently raised with Him in order to walk in newness of life (Rm 6:4). Therefore, “*if we have been united together in the likeness of His [Christ’s] death [in baptism], we will also be in the likeness of His resurrection*” (Rm 6:5). We connect with the future resurrection when Jesus comes again when we are raised with Christ from the waters of baptism.

If one denies the resurrection in the end, then he has denied the reason we are buried and raised with Christ in the present. If one denies this part in our obedience to the gospel, **then he has denied the totality**

of the gospel! Why would the Son of God ever leave the comforts of eternity in heaven in order to die on an “old rugged cross” for our sins if there were no resurrection in the future? Why would one even be raised from the grave of water with Jesus if there were no such thing as a resurrection from the dead?

One is a Christian because he or she has followed Jesus to the cross, and from a grave of water, to the promise of a bodily resurrection in the future by being raised with Jesus from the waters of baptism. In this response to the gospel of Jesus, one has obeyed the gospel. It is for this reason that Christians are encouraged, motivated and compelled to both obey and preach the gospel to others (See 1 Pt 4:17).

When we bring into doubt any part of the message of the gospel, or response to it, then we deny the reality of the gospel. **We have left the motivation of our first love, and thus, our motivation to seek and save the lost!** Any doubt or denial of the resurrection of both Jesus, and ourselves in the future, cuts the heart out of the gospel. Christians are believers to be pitied for their faith if there is no resurrection of the body when Jesus comes again (1 Co 15:19). If there is no bodily resurrection when Jesus comes, then we lose our motivation to take the message of the gos-

pel into all the world (See Mk 16:15,16).

We thus preach and obey the “gospel connection” (baptism) of Jesus as necessary in order to enjoy the coming resurrection from the dead. We are not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus’ atoning death and bodily resurrection (Rm 1:16). Neither are we ashamed of proclaiming the mandate of the Holy Scriptures that one must connect with the gospel of Jesus through immersion into Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection. If we would be ashamed of this connection, then we would reveal to the world that we actually have little faith in the power of Jesus’ atoning death and bodily resurrection.

We must never lead ourselves to believe that the power unto salvation is simply in our own belief in the gospel. Neither is our salvation in a legal action of baptism in water. The power unto salvation is the gospel of Jesus’ atoning sacrifice and resurrection (1 Co 1:18). When we are responsive to the gospel by baptism into Christ, then we connect with the atoning death of Jesus in order that our sins be washed away (At 22:16). It is through this obedient connection that we are raised with Him in anticipation of the resurrection of the dead when He comes again (See Jn 5:28,29). In order to connect with the power of the gospel, therefore, one

must go to the cross, grave, and then experience a resurrection with Jesus when we come forth from the waters of baptism.

13 LOSING THE OBJECTIVE

In another book before the writing of the book of Revelation (1 John), the apostle John prepared us for the correct interpretation of the historical “fall” of the disciples in Ephesus that he recorded in Revelation 2:1-7. But first listen to these words from the epistle of 1 John:

*In this the love of God was manifested to us, that **God sent His only begotten Son into the world** so that we might live through Him. **In this is love**, not that we loved God, but that **He loved us and sent His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins** (1 Jn 4:9,10).*

This is gospel! God demonstrated “*His love toward us, **in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us***” (Rm 5:8). He did this because “***He so loved the world***” (Jn 3:16). God’s gospel love for us generates in our hearts the same response toward those who have not heard and obeyed the gospel. As God demonstrated His love toward us who were lost, we must demonstrate our love for the lost by either personally taking or

sending the gospel to them. As God moved beyond “staying in heaven” in His love for us, we must move beyond our comfort zones in order that others will somehow hear and obey the gospel the gospel.

Because we so love the souls of others, we are moved out of our comfort zones in order to share the gospel with the lost. It was God revealing His heart for us through Jesus that motivates our hearts to go to the lost. John wrote in the context of 1 John 4, “*We love because He first loved us*” (1 Jn 4:19). In other words, we love the lost because our Father first loved us in our state of condemnation in sin (Rm 5:8). Because of this love, we are motivated to preach the gospel to the lost. Because God in His love for us sent to us the gospel message through His Son, we seek in missions to send the gospel message to others because of our love for them.

God revealed His heart of love for us through the sacrificial atonement of the cross in order that we might abide in His love after our resurrection from baptism to walk in newness of life. There could never have been a more glorious message of hope for mankind. We are motivated to love the lost because we have been loved at the cross. **Preaching the gospel to the lost, therefore, is our first love!** It is for this reason that those who are not evangelistic to-

ward the lost, or do not support the gospel in missions to the lost, have lost their love for the souls of the lost. They have left their first love of the gospel that was poured out for them from the heart of God. Since their hearts have grown cold in reference to lost souls, they have lost their motivation to preach the gospel of love to the world. They are no longer excited about sowing the seed of the kingdom, because they have lost their excitement about the spiritual needs of the lost.

There is more to the lack of an evangelistic spirit than simply not doing evangelism. It is a problem of the heart. Those who have no heart for evangelism can be evangelistic out of law and duty. They can be such out of duty to fulfill a “law of preaching the gospel to the lost.” But obedience to law in reference to being evangelistic betrays one’s heart. It reveals that the gospel is not the motivation of one’s heart to love the lost.

The gospel-motivated disciple is evangelistic. He does not do evangelism out of duty. He is evangelistic simply because he cannot be any other way. He is evangelistic by life-style. The love of God that dwells in his heart explodes with the joy of the gospel message because he walks in gratitude for his own salvation. It is for this reason that those who are not evangelistic have a heart problem.

They have lost their love for the lost because they have lost their appreciation for the loving grace of God that came into their lives through their obedience to the gospel. Therefore, in order to restore an evangelistic spirit among the believers, we must focus on the gospel of grace that was evangelistically manifested toward us through the incarnational offering of Jesus. This is the mind of Christ (See Ph 2:5-11).

14 LOSING OUT ON LOVE

The Christians in Ephesus lost their love for the lost. As the lost to whom God had demonstrated His love through the cross, the first generation of disciples in Ephesus initially responded to the gospel of love. But as the years went by they eventually lost the gospel motivating love to preach the gospel to the lost. By the time Revelation was written by John, they had become faithful religionists who carried on with their “Christian” heritage, but the very core of their existence as Christians passed away. They left their gospel-motivated faith and went back into a works-oriented faith of self-sanctification.

In the beginning of the gospel in Ephesus, the first converts started out with a big bang of evangelistic enthusiasm. The gospel seriously moved

them to obedience of the gospel. However, at least thirty years later their children lost this vibrant love of the gospel. From Acts 19 to the writing of the book of Revelation at the end of the first century, something went tragically wrong between their beginning and imminent ending as the lampstand for our Lord in Ephesus.

The historical setting of the Ephesian disciples at the time of the writing of Revelation may help in understanding where they went wrong. We must understand first that there were groups of disciples meeting in homes throughout the area of Ephesus. Regardless of where they were assembling on Sunday morning, they were still the one united church of Ephesus (Rv 2:1). Their assemblies did not identify them as the church of Ephesus. For this reason, Jesus did not address them according to some supposed dynamic assemblies by which they compared the assembly of one group with another. Their problem was collective as the saints in all of Ephesus. This may answer some of the reasons why they went collectively wrong. In their house fellowships they became so engaged with themselves that they forgot the lost. They ignored the rest of Asia and the world beyond.

We need to go back to their beginning in order to understand their imminent ending at the time John

wrote. At the end of his second mission journey, Paul had picked up Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth and dropped them off in Ephesus on his way to Jerusalem (At 18:1-3,18,19). Ephesus was subsequently given an injection of gospel-obedient and evangelistically-oriented leadership to counter the religious idolaters of the culture.

When Paul returned to the city on his third mission journey about a year later, he initially contacted about twelve disciples who were meeting in their homes. Since they knew only the baptism of John, we would assume that they had been meeting faithfully in their homes from the time of the ministry of John the Baptist that occurred over twenty-five years before Paul encountered them on this third mission visit (At 19:1-7). Their ability to remain as disciples of John for so long in a society of idolatry may give us some insight into how strongly they had bonded with one another as a group. In fact, they may have bonded so strongly that they felt comfortable with themselves, and thus, felt no desire to reach outside their group with what knowledge they had of the Messiah.

While in Ephesus on his third mission trip, Paul went to work. He taught in the synagogue of the Jews for three months. He reasoned daily in the school of Tyrannus for two

years (At 19:9,10). In all, he worked in the city for about three years (At 20:31). His leadership in teaching inspired the disciples to be mission-minded, for “*all those who dwelt in Asia heard the [gospel] word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks*” (At 19:10).

The result of the evangelistic preaching of the gospel by Paul, Aquila and Priscilla, and later Apollos, was overwhelming. The local Jews finally understood the heart of God that was revealed through the Messiah—who was, they came to realize, the Son of God. And the Greeks, they burned their foolish fetishes and religious magic books (At 19:19). “*Fear fell on them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified*” (At 19:17). The gospel message produced fear in the hearts of those religionists who came “*confessing and disclosing their practices*” (At 19:18). This fear was both a motive for their own obedience, as well as the stimulus for their missions into all Asia. They were motivated to sow the gospel seed of the kingdom in all Asia because they realized that there was no salvation outside Christ (At 4:12). They realized that people must obey the gospel in order to wash away their sins (At 22:16). And in order for people to obey the gospel, they must preach the gospel.

We can only imagine the evan-

gelistic fervor of every disciple in Ephesus in those early days who joined with the evangelistic outreach of the early leaders to preach the gospel both in Ephesus and all Asia. The houses of Christians throughout the region of Ephesus were filled with former idolatrous worshipers who obeyed the gospel. The gospel was preached, and the gospel was obeyed as every river in and around Ephesus rippled with waves from men and women going down into the water in order to bury old dead men.

Resurrections from water were the occasion of rejoicing as Christians throughout the area witnessed the fruit of the preaching of the gospel. Former faithful Jews who had maintained their allegiance to God through Moses, responded in obedience to the gospel of the incarnate Son of God. The disciples also loved their idolatrous neighbors, and subsequently, they preached the message of the gospel to them. The gospel message moved them to preach the gospel to an entire city and all Asia. It was a glorious time in the history of the church as the gospel found receptive hearts in Ephesus, and then spread into all Asia. In those early days of their history as new Christians, their first love came to life and was revealed in every body of water surrounding Ephesus. They truly emulated the heart of God who so loved

the world that He sent His Son into the world with the message of the gospel (Jn 3:16).

But as the years went by, “church heritage” eventually kicked in and enthusiasm cooled. The influence of the works-oriented religion of Judaism seemed to have taken the children of the first converts into a spirit of works-oriented religiosity. We do not know all the details, but something went very wrong over a period of at least thirty years from the dynamic beginning in Acts 19 to the time when the Eternal Judge pronounced the judgment words of Revelation 2:4: *“Nevertheless, I have this against you, that you have left your first love.”* Tragic!

The Ephesians started out as gospel-motivated disciples meeting in their homes throughout the region of Ephesus. They also moved in missions even beyond their borders to all Asia. But the flaming fire that first burned in their hearts turned into a lost love in the latter end of their existence as the “church of Ephesus.”

The parents failed to pass on to their children a heritage of dedicated missions. **It seems that they were content to fellowship with themselves in the confines of their own homes while the rest of the world remained lost.** We have seen the same today as attendees sit comfortably in their own church sanctuaries

singing “send the light,” when all they are doing is “sittin’ tight.”

Nevertheless, the Ephesians were doing some good things among themselves in order to continue their heritage as the church. We must not forget that Jesus addressed them in Revelation 2 as the “*church of Ephesus*” (Rv 2:1). They could still be considered the church of Christ, but only on one condition: “**Remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the first works**” (Rv 2:5). If they did not repent and restore, Jesus proclaimed, “*I will come to you quickly and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent*” (Rv 2:5). They could continue to enthrall themselves with themselves with works for themselves, but their influence for the gospel light of Jesus in Ephesus would naturally be extinguished if they did not repent and restore the first works. We must always remember that a church house full of assembled religionists will always continue long after the lampstand is removed. Even if their works-oriented faith gives them a great name in the city, they will be considered a “dead horse church” if they do not revive their love for the gospel, and the lost to whom the gospel must be preached.

The Ephesian disciples had “fallen,” and in order to be identified as the church in the future who repre-

sented the Son of God, they had to return to the days when the gospel of the love of God burned hot in their souls. They had to restore the first works. They had to remember and resurrect their former gospel-motivated evangelistic works, and once again restore their mission outreach to the world.

After His complements for their existing “works-based church programs,” Jesus pronounced His judgment. He knew their existing legal-based works, labor and patience. They had persevered through persecution in the past and been patient to maintain their identity with Christ in the present (Rv 2:2,3). Without failing, they carried on with their works-based programs in the name of Jesus (Rv 2:4). However, it seems that over the years they established a system of legal-oriented, and thus self-sanctifying religious works for Jesus’ “*name’s sake*.” It seems that they were caught up in their works-oriented programs to the point that they forgot the purpose of their Founder, to seek and to save the lost.

When Jesus commanded, “*do the first works*,” He did not mean to establish more legal-oriented good-work programs for themselves. He meant that they needed to do their first evangelistic works that led directly to the saving of the lost. He meant that they needed to do their former mis-

sion outreach to their neighbors, to all Asia, and the world.

Their behavior indicated that they had forgotten the motivation of the core of their faith. They continued to work in the name of Jesus, but they left the very heart of what brought them into existence as disciples of Jesus many years before. They “left,” or “lost” their first love. They left their gospel motivation, replacing it with self-sanctifying legal works that focused on themselves. As a result, they may have simply digressed into an assembly-oriented churchianity wherein they were content with themselves.

The first thing that we must do when we realize that we have lost our first love for the souls of men, is to confess the fact that we are no longer evangelistic. We are no longer representing Jesus and the gospel in our community. We are no longer preaching the gospel both locally, and in missions, to “all Asia.”

Churches that have no local evangelistic zeal have lost their first love. If they have no local evangelistic zeal, then certainly they have no concern for preaching the gospel to the world. These are churches that Jesus would exhort by saying that they need to repent and restore the first gospel-based faith that would move them first into their own community, and also to “all Asia.” Ephesus

needed to remember that lampstands can always be removed. If there is no preaching of the gospel light of Jesus in our community, then the light of the gospel lampstand has gone out.

15 GOSPEL MOTIVATION

If 1 John 4:19 is any commentary on Revelation 2:4—where Jesus rebuked the Ephesian disciples for losing their first love—the love that they left was their gospel love for the lost that was motivated by God’s gospel love for them (See Rm 5:8). They forsook their personal evangelistic outreach locally, and subsequently, their mission outreach to all Asia. They were no longer a center from which the gospel was preached to the world. In comparison to the problem that prevailed in Ephesus, it is easy to identify similar “Ephesian churches” today who focus on themselves through dynamic local programs for themselves, but they have forgotten the rest of the world. We must never forget how subtle it is to move from a gospel-based faith to a works-based religiosity. The move is subtle because we find satisfaction in the self-sanctification of our many programs of work.

The point is that the many programs of ministry must continue, but when churches leave the gospel motivation of God’s love for the lost, they

turn to defending their heritage of a works-based faith in order to justify their identity as an active church. Any church that is self-absorbed in its own works-oriented programs ceases being mission-minded. They have forgotten that self-assurance as the church of God is sustained when we are doing God's business. And God's business is to seek and to save the lost (Lk 19:10). It seems that the Ephesian disciples had somehow diverted their attention away from the prime objective of doing God's business to seek and to save the lost.

Such churches, as Ephesus, often resort to "good works" in order to busy themselves with themselves. In doing so they often seek to justify their lack of evangelistic outreach to their communities and to the world. On more than one occasion we have heard church leaders say, "We must first build up our local base, and then we will be able to preach the gospel to other areas."

When churches are in decline, it is a common motivation to focus on developing more dynamic assemblies to "save our children." Or, we hire an "entertainment minister" to keep our children busy with themselves. Or, we develop a dynamic Bible school program for ourselves, or more entertaining assemblies. Unfortunately, the introversion of focusing on ourselves leads to our continued de-

cline. If we wake up one day and look back thirty years in our history, and see that we are the same today in numbers that we were then, then we know that we are in trouble. Though we may be the same in numbers locally, we must ask ourselves if we have started another "Ephesian movement" somewhere else in the world. If we have not, then we are truly a "dead horse church." If the present behavior of the Ephesian church at the time of Jesus' judgment in Revelation 2 continued, the church in Ephesus would eventually go out of existence. And it did.

"Ephesian churches" who have lost their first love often satisfy themselves to be self-sanctified before God through their many local works for themselves. They make themselves feel comfortable through dynamic works that are focused on themselves, but ignore the very purpose of why Jesus came into the world—to seek and to save those who are lost (Lk 19:10). Churches can often be so caught up in their own orchestrated assemblies, Bible school programs, Christian schools, etc. that they forget their prime mission, that is to seek and to save the lost.

We often become as Jesus judged the disciples in Pergamum, "*You hold fast to My name and have not denied My faith*" (Rv 2:13). But then they condoned wayward behavior as for-

nication that compromised the truth of gospel living. Subsequently, in the community it was as Jesus pronounced judgment on the disciples in Sardis: *“I know your works [your dynamic inward focused programs], that you have a name that you live, but you are dead”* (Rv 3:1). The pronouncement by Jesus, *“but you are dead,”* should send chills through the souls of Christians who think they are alive through their many works. Ephesus, Pergamum and Sardis had formerly been gospel-living churches in their communities and in all Asia. But by the time Jesus made His judgment of them in Revelation, they all were in need of repentance. They were “active churches” that were all in need of restoration because they left their first love.

When we find ourselves judgmental of others because of their lack of works-based programs, then we know that we have become as the self-sanctifying older brother in the parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32). We are quick to judge others dead by the standard of our supposed faithfulness through our many works. While the younger wayward brother repented in remorse, we exalt ourselves to be self-righteous in our works-based faith of supposedly staying faithful to God.

We must always remember that an “active church” is not necessarily

an evangelistic or mission-minded church. If no one is obeying the gospel either locally, or through mission-supported works into “all Asia,” then an “active church” will think that it is alive, when actually it is dead. Works-oriented churches are often as the Sardis church: *“I know your works,”* Jesus judged, *“that you have a name that you live, but you are dead”* (Rv 3:1).

We can perform many self-sanctifying works to make ourselves feel good about ourselves. However, if we have lost our way evangelistically, then Jesus would judge us to be dead disciples because the gospel is not being lived and preached and souls saved through obedience to the gospel locally and “all Asia.” If we are not loving local people into Christ as God loved us into His grace through His Son, then we are dead. We have forsaken the core motivation of the gospel message of the incarnate Son of God. We have in apostasy moved from being gospel-motivated Christians to works-oriented religionists who would justify immoral life-styles and gospel outreach through our own self-sanctifying works.

16 LOSING ONE ANOTHER

Herein possibly lies the paramount danger of the modern church. We know that the Ephesian disciples

left their first love, but we are not told why or how. Maybe some speculation at this point would help. At least their history from beginning to imminent demise might aid us in understanding that we too can be found to have lost our first love.

If we assume the late date for the writing of the book of Revelation, this would place the state of spiritual affairs of the Ephesian disciples to exist sometime in the last part of the first century. If Revelation were written around A.D. 96, then those who were members of the body of Christ at that time were about **forty years** removed from those exciting days of evangelism that are recorded in Acts 18 & 19, which days existed with Paul's visit to the city in the latter 50s. Therefore, Jesus' address that they had left their first love was directed to the children, and possibly grandchildren, of those who were the fathers of their faith in the area of Ephesus, which fathers were the first converts.

In our speculations of the possible cause of their leaving their first love, we must not forget the other five churches of Asia that Jesus addressed who had other problems. Only the church in Philadelphia escaped any judgment by Jesus in reference to lifestyle problems from which they needed to repent (See Rv 3:7-12).

Because the other churches of Asia suffered from spiritual problems

from which they needed to repent, we might conclude that the "mother church" of Ephesus, from which the other churches possibly came into existence when the gospel went forth into all Asia during Paul's three-year stay in Ephesus, failed in their "all Asia" responsibility to lead the way in living the gospel of Jesus.

It is apparent that the disciples in Ephesus suffered from a loss of love for the lost. It may have been that the house fellowships became autonomous from one another to the point that they fell out of love with the whole church of Ephesus. They failed to live the gospel in order to keep immorality out of their lives. The origin of the problem could have been with the parents. The children of these parents, who at the time John wrote, composed the saints who were living in Ephesus. We could assume that the parents who were first converted during the Acts 19 evangelistic euphoria, many of whom were dead at the time John wrote, did not pass on to their children the zeal of their original evangelistic spirit. Or possibly, by the time of the existence of the church in Ephesus the latter part of the first century, the church was composed of older members who had lost the zeal of their youth.

If this church followed the pattern of many churches in reference to their growth, they had an exciting pe-

riod of growth in the first decade of their existence in Acts 19. But as time passed, growth slowed, and thus, the children of the early pioneers grew up in a “church atmosphere” wherein the evangelistic enthusiasm of the first years of the existence of the church had cooled. Forty years later when Revelation 2 was written, the generation that existed at the time had left the first love of the early church in Ephesus.

But there may have been other scenarios that caused their stagnant growth by the time John penned the words of Revelation. When Paul made his last visit through the area of Ephesus and called the leaders of the church of Ephesus together in Miletus, he reminded them, “*Therefore watch, and remember that for a period of three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears*” (At 20:31).

Paul realized that something serious was coming in the history of the church of Ephesus, something about which they needed to be warned. The members who were alive at the time of the writing of Revelation 2 certainly could not blame those who initiated the establishment of the church in Ephesus. Their forefathers had been warned that they could end up where they were spiritually at the time John wrote. They needed, therefore, to take ownership of their own loss

of the first love upon which the church of Ephesus was built.

It is interesting to notice where Paul said their fall would originate. In the verse preceding Paul’s statement on the Acts 20 visit, he prophesied, “*From your own selves will men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves*” (At 20:30). Paul did not reveal the “perverse things” that would be spoken. However, one thing was clear, and that was that **narcissistic leaders would seek to establish autonomous groups after themselves**. They would speak those “perverse things” that would lead to the rise of independent, autonomous churches in the area of Ephesus who would have little to do with one another. “Pastors” (shepherds) would claim a portion of the flock, and subsequently reign over them with autocratic lordship.

If this were indeed the case, then we must remember that the church in Ephesus was initially started with the members meeting in different homes throughout the city. At that time they were the one united church of Ephesus, though they assembled in the homes of the members throughout the city. They were the one multiple-assembly church of Ephesus. At the time John wrote, Jesus even addressed them still as the one church of Ephesus in Revelation 2:1.

Jesus viewed the disciples in Ephesus from heaven down, whereas by the time John wrote the members viewed the church in Ephesus from the bottom up, that is, from their autonomous behavior of being independent from one another. Nevertheless, though the members were meeting in different homes at the time Jesus addressed them in Revelation 2, He still viewed them as His one body in Ephesus, regardless of whose house in which each member sat on Sunday morning.

By A.D. 61,62, when Paul wrote the epistle of Ephesians, something was at this time starting to present itself as divisive. What he prophesied in the Miletus meeting of Acts 20 was coming to pass by the time he wrote the Ephesian letter. We see this in Paul's exhortation to the members of the church in Ephesus at the time he wrote the Ephesian letter: "... *walk worthy of the calling with which you were called ... **being eager to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.... There is one** [universal] **body**" (Ep 4:1,3,4).*

At the time of the writing of the letter to the Ephesian church in A.D. 60,61, Paul saw the fulfillment of his prophesy that they would separate from one another into their own autonomous groups as he stated in Acts 20:30. Some commentators believe that this is possibly the meaning of

their lost love by the time Jesus addressed them in Revelation 2:4. They had ceased "*forbearing one another in love*" (Ep 4:2), and subsequently divided into autonomous groups that became anonymous from one another.

This could have been possible because the city of Ephesus was a city of at least a quarter million people. It would be easy in such a city for the disciples to lose contact with one another. After all, the twelve disciples that Paul found a year later when he returned to the city after leaving Aquila and Priscilla in the city, were unknown to Priscilla and Aquila (At 19:1,2). The couple were in the city approximate one year while Paul was gone, but still had no contact with the twelve disciples in order to instruct them further in gospel as they had instructed Apollos. Being separated from one another as groups would have been easy where there was a lack of communication. However, we would not assume that their loss of communication with one another predated their loss of love for one another. They were simply a limited number of disciples in a large metropolitan area.

We could assume, however, that two problems would eventually prevail after Paul left the Acts 20 meeting with the elders in Miletus. These problems would produce the autonomous groups from among the numer-

ous house fellowships throughout the region of Ephesus. First, those who would promote this autonomy would be narcissistic in seeking others to follow them. The “perverse things” were spoken by individual personalities who sought to surround themselves with disciples who would exalt them as their leader. It would have been the same as the problem among the house fellowships throughout the province of Achaia. Paul wrote of that situation, “... *each one of you says, ‘I am of Paul,’ and ‘I am of Apollos,’ and ‘I am of Cephas’ ...*” (1 Co 1:12). Paul’s corrective response to this denominating of the body into autonomous groups was, “*Is Christ divided?*” (1 Co 1:13). We would assume, therefore, that Paul’s prophecy in the Miletus meeting of Acts 20 was that there would be divisions into autonomous groups in the area of Ephesus. His prophecy had actually come to fulfillment by the time John wrote Revelation about forty years later.

The second problem for the division into autonomous groups revealed the narcissistic personalities of those who sought their own house church group they could control through lordship intimidation. This was illustrated by the behavior of Diotrephes. Diotrephes separated unto himself an autonomous group in this way because he loved to be first, just as Paul had prophesied that some shep-

herds (pastors) would assemble the disciples under their own control (See 3 Jn 9,10). Peter revealed the same spirit of lordship when he wrote to the disciples in the middle 60s who were “*in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia [where Ephesus was located] and Bithynia*” (1 Pt 1:1; 5:1-4).

It would be correct to say that the very exhortation to avoid lordship leadership about which Paul, Peter and John forewarned, had come to pass by the time Revelation was written. The disciples had lost their “first love” for one another by splitting into autonomous groups who called themselves after their respective “pastor.” And in splitting into autonomous groups they lost their collective evangelistic outreach as one church.

When Jesus said that there would be no lordship leadership among His disciples, many of the early leaders failed to heed this warning (See Mk 10:42,43). Because they sought to be lords of the flock, they drew disciples away after themselves into autonomous house churches. The leaders loved to be preeminent among the disciples, and thus they became lords of their own autonomous flocks. We would assume that any leader who would seek to establish autonomous groups of disciples after themselves would be speaking “perverse things” to accomplish the denominationalism of the universal body of Christ.

17 COMMON GOSPEL MISSION

When lordship leaders seek to be first among the disciples, they pass on the same spirit of lordship to young leaders who follow them. Since Paul's prophecy that some in the church in Ephesus would eventually become denominational with different autonomous groups throughout the region of Ephesus, we could assume that there was at least some competition between the autonomous groups. Such was certainly happening when John wrote of Diotrephes in 3 John 9,10.

We might even assume that when 3 John was written, John could have been in the region of Ephesus, which he was at the end of his life in exile on the island of Patmos off the coast of Ephesus (Rv 1:9). If indeed Diotrephes lived in the area of Ephesus, then this would certainly explain the character and behavior of those leaders about whom Paul prophesied would draw away disciples after themselves. Diotrephes could have been one of those shepherds. John wrote to Gaius of the behavior of Diotrephes, and thus explained the divisive environment of the house fellowships in his area when Diotrephes drew away disciples after himself:

Therefore, if I [John] come I will remember his deeds that he does, unjustly accusing us [the apostles and

evangelists] *with malicious words* ["perverse things"]. *And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren [evangelists], and forbids those who would. And he casts them out of the church* [his assembly] (3 Jn 10).

If this was indeed the relationship among some of the brethren in Ephesus, then we can certainly understand why the disciples left their first love. When there is much dissension among the brethren, the brethren have little desire to work together in order to preach the gospel to the world. This is exactly what Diotrephes was promoting. He was discouraging his group over which he exercised dominance, to join any efforts to support cooperatively the traveling evangelists.

When the church in any region become independent autonomous groups, the resources of the members is restricted to the needs of the members themselves. The unfortunate consequence of several autonomous groups within a particular region is that **they grow away from one another**, and thus their focus turns on themselves and what works they can do for themselves to preserve their existence. In their introverted autonomy, they often find it difficult to work in financial fellowship as autonomous groups in order to send forth evange-

lists into the world (See Rm 10:14,15). Members in autonomous churches find it difficult to understand the organic function of the universal body of Christ. In heaven, Jesus views His body working together throughout the world as one body.

One of the dysfunctional behavioral practices of Diotrephes was not to receive the traveling evangelists. He wanted to shut down any evangelists, including the apostle John himself, from visiting the group, or groups, over which he exercised lordship. John referred to this behavior as evil (3 Jn 11).

As opposed to the mission-supporting work of Gaius (3 Jn 1-8), Diotrephes' behavior was contrary to the love of God to seek and to save the lost. If indeed Diotrephes lived in the area of Ephesus at the time John wrote the book of Revelation, then we can understand why there were problems among the Ephesian brethren concerning both their loss of love for one another as autonomous groups, as well as their diversion from loving the lost in all the world.

One of Satan's greatest weapons he uses against the church of our Lord is to encourage leaders to separate from one another by speaking "perverse things" ("malicious words") about one another. He encourages such slander in order to discourage the members of the body from being the

one universal body of Christ that universally functions as one.

When the church in any region is organically dysfunctional by the separating of members into autonomous groups that speak against one another, then the members have little interest to work together to preach the gospel to the lost. They become obsessed with their own individual programs to the exclusion of the universal body. Though in their own autonomous groups they may service their own needs with dynamic works, they often grow cold in their interest of world evangelism by their obsession with themselves. They will turn from converting the lost through the preaching of the gospel to preaching church in order to convert people into their own autonomous groups, or activate the disciples to become involved in a local "church program." This seems to be what the problem was with the churches of Asia. Jesus complemented them in reference to their active works, but they were active in works to the exclusion of concentrating on gospel living and evangelism.

What happens in such scenarios is the case that was illustrated by Gaius. Gaius, as an individual, was mission-minded. He continued to do well in receiving and financially supporting the preaching of the gospel through traveling evangelists (3 Jn 3-

8). John encouraged Gaius with the words, “*Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren [visiting evangelists] and strangers*” (3 Jn 5).

Because Gaius was in a situation where Diotrephes discouraged those groups over which he exercised control to cooperatively join in supporting the evangelists, John encouraged Gaius, “*You will do well to support them [the evangelists] on their journey in a manner worthy of God*” (3 Jn 6).

Diotrephes, on the contrary, hindered the missions in which Gaius was involved. He sought to discourage anyone in his autonomous group, or groups, from supporting those who had gone forth for the sake of Jesus’ name. He evidently wanted to keep all the contributions at home in order to focus it on the needs of the local group over which he had preeminence.

Churches that are in a stagnant state of non-growth may content themselves with works among themselves, but they will never feel good about themselves until they repent and restore their good work of reaching out to their lost neighbors. Their repentance, however, must go far beyond their neighborhoods. In order to restore their self-esteem as disciples of the Son of God who left heaven for them, they must restore their mis-

sions to the world. As a united group of disciples they must have confidence in themselves that they can bring all the world into Christ if they seek to take Christ into all the world.

We have found that Christians that have no mission outreach do not feel good about themselves. If they do feel good about themselves without any mission outreach, then they have contented themselves with self-sanctifying good works for themselves. They have thus lost their way. They have lost their first love. They think they are alive, but they are dead in reference to preaching the gospel to the world.

18 THE LIVING DEAD CHURCH

Once upon a time, people kept strolling by this particular young man and saying to him, “Get off that horse!” Day after day, people kept instructing the young man with the same advice: “Get off that horse.” And then one gentleman came by and said, “Get off that horse. It’s dead!” What the young man needed was some advice as to why he needed to get off that dead horse. It was dead!

And so it is with some churches. They are long past dead. As the church in Sardis, they are dead horse churches that are going nowhere unless they repent. No matter how much one whacks on a dead horse church,

it will not move. Death gives no response. Sometimes a church has been dead for so long that people have grown accustomed to the smell of death, and thus think it is quite alive. But no matter how much one individual keeps beating the dead horse church, it will not move. It is simply dead!

Dead horse churches are easy to identify. They can be identified by the fact that they have forgotten the mission of their Founder. Jesus identified His mission with the statement, *“For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost”* (Lk 19:10). When a church is not preaching the gospel and baptizing people, it has lost its mission. It is a dead horse church.

Now we must be fair. The body of members of a dead horse church may be in an area where receptivity of the gospel is long gone. The members are riding out the storm of spiritual death in a community that has long ago grown cold to the gospel. However, being in such a predicament does not mean that a group has to be a dead horse church. If the church is actively supporting the preaching of the gospel in other regions of “all Asia” and the world, **then it is not a dead horse church**. The members are as Gaius who did not forget the mission of his Master. He financially supported evangelists who (1) “*went*

forth for the sake of the Name” of Jesus. (2) He supported such gospel preachers because they did not take up contributions from the unbelievers in order to support themselves. (3) Therefore, Gaius financially supported such evangelists in order that he might be a fellow worker for the truth (3 Jn 7,8).

If a church is located in an unreceptive area, but is still supporting missions, **then it is not a dead horse church**. It is quite alive because the members have not forgotten the mission of their Master. But if the church is not preaching the gospel and baptizing anyone at home, or supporting the preaching of the gospel to other regions, then it is a dead horse church.

Dead horse churches have lost their way because they have lost their first love. And in the context of the Ephesian church, and in view of the phenomenal growth the members of this church had in their beginning, by the time John wrote the book of Revelation, they had become a dead horse church. They had left their first love (Rv 2:4). It was a time in their history, therefore, for them to “*remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the first works*” (Rv 2:5). Dead horse churches must always repent. If they do not, then they are not a church of the Christ who came to this world to seek and to save the lost. They do not have the mind

of Christ who left heaven on a mission to the cross for their sake (Ph 2:5-11). They are dead in reference to the work for which Jesus came into the world.

Some churches have been dead for so long that they do not sense the stench of death that surrounds them. These are often legal-oriented churches who have convinced themselves that if they perform a meritorious ceremony of worship every Sunday morning, then they are self-sanctified before God because of the legal performance of their assemblies. They have thus deceived themselves into thinking that they are “legally” alive through their self-righteous ceremonies of perfect law-keeping. But if people are not obeying the gospel, or the members are not reaching out in some way to the world with the gospel, then they are a dead horse church.

The worst case scenario is when a dead horse church deceives itself into thinking that it is alive. This was the church in Sardis. Remember what Jesus said of this church? *“I know your works, that you have a name that you live, but you are dead”* (Rv 3:1). Sardis was a walking dead church. They had movement that gave the pretense of being alive, but they were still a walking dead church.

Some churches think they are alive by having energetic assemblies from which people go forth exhorted

and floating on an emotional cloud until the next appointed concert. But in their emotional euphoria no one is being baptized into the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. None of the members are financially supporting the preaching of the gospel to the world. This is a church that thinks it is alive because of their theatrical performances every Sunday morning, or works-based faith in doing many “religious works” (See Mt 7:21-23). But it is a dead horse church, for it is not seeking and saving the lost through the preaching of the gospel. It has lost its way and forgotten the mission of its Founder to seek and to save those who are lost.

So what would Jesus advise a dead horse church? Simple. *“Be watchful and strengthen the things that remain, that are ready to die, for I have not found your works completed before God”* (Rv 3:2). There is hope for dead horse churches only if the members strengthen those things that still have some life in them. But if they do not strengthen those living parts, then they will continue on death row. Though those things are at the brink of death, every effort must be made to bring life back into even a whisper of breath in order that the church not die. If a dead horse church cannot be resuscitated through the power of the gospel, then it is gone. *“Get off that horse!”* The Holy Spirit

would exhort, “*Awake [be resuscitated] you who sleep and arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light*” (Ep 5:14). But if a dead horse church is going nowhere, then one should continue doing what he or she should evangelistically do regardless of any opposition from a Diotrephes. Gaius sought the encouragement of John, and John advised Gaius to connect with Demetrius who would encourage him (3 Jn 12). If a restoration to focus on the gospel will not resuscitate a walking dead church, then it is truly dead, though there may be some staggering movement in the body.

A vibrant body of believers in Nigeria once determined not to be a “movement of dead horse churches,” which is actually an oxymoron. There is no such thing as a movement of dead horse churches. Dead horse churches move nowhere.

So this evangelistically-oriented group financially supported a Nigerian evangelist to move to Cape Town, South Africa. Within five years the evangelist had four groups established in four different areas of the Cape Peninsula. The members were thriving. People were being baptized and 150 workers of the four groups assembled regularly to inspire love and evangelistic outreach in the four targeted regions of Cape Town. In their sixth year, the missionary who was first sent

from Nigeria worked on immigrating to either Cyprus or Canada in order to do the same. These folks had simply determined not to be dead horse churches.

If a dead horse church wakes up one day and reads Revelation 2:1-7, then the members need to read the warning of Jesus in Revelation 2:5:

Therefore, remember from where you have fallen, and repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and will remove your lampstand out of its place—unless you repent.

19 KNOWING GOD

2 Thessalonians 1:8,9 is a most intriguing statement by the Holy Spirit in reference to the final coming of Jesus. Through the hand of Paul the Spirit revealed a very important concept in reference to the final judgment that Jesus will hand out when He comes again with His holy angels. It is not difficult to identify the specifics of the events surrounding the final coming. But what is significant is the identity of those who “*will be punished with everlasting destruction away from the presence of the Lord and away from the glory of His power*” (2 Th 1:9). Notice in verse 8 those who will suffer this final calamity: “... *those who do not know God*

and who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

At first glance we might assume that there are two groups who will suffer the destruction of the judgment of the coming King. We might be tempted to interpret that the statement means that those who do not know God would be a specific group. This would certainly be true. And then the second group would be those who do not obey the gospel. But when considered in the context who God is, and our relationship with Him through obedience to the gospel, there can be only one group. This is the group of those who do not obey the gospel of the God who so loved the world. They do not obey because they never discover the heart of God who gave His only begotten Son.

The lengthy compound sentence of 2 Thessalonians 1 actually identifies those who had the opportunity to know the God of love. Their limited or unresponsive belief did not motivate them to obey the gospel of this God. These would be those who do not really know the God of love of the Bible. Therefore, in the context of the gospel message of love of this God, they do not obey the sacrificial death of the incarnate Son of God in order to experience the resurrection unto life.

Their refusal to obey the gospel reveals that they do not know the heart

of God as it was revealed through the cross and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, they are not able to dwell for eternity in the presence of the God who so loved the world that He sacrificed His only begotten Son (Jn 3:16). They are not candidates for dwelling in a realm of love because on earth they revealed that they were not of a loving character.

A. The loving presence of God:

“He who does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 Jn 4:8). This will be the eternal environment wherein the loving will dwell. In order to prove His nature before all men, John revealed that *“the love of God was manifested to us, that God sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him”* (1 Jn 4:9). Love defines the presence of God into which all those who love God are destined to reside. If one is not of a nature of love, then certainly he or she forfeits the right to dwell in an eternal environment of love.

So John the apostle of love continued to explain, *“Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another”* (1 Jn 4:11). The deduction is obvious. *“We love because He first loved us”* (1 Jn 4:19). If we do not love, then certainly we do not know the God of love. Now notice care-

fully John's definition of the presence of God about which Paul wrote in 2 Thessalonians 1:6-9: "***And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who dwells in love dwells in God and God in him***" (1 Jn 4:16). Dwelling in the presence of the God of love, therefore, begins even before the final judgment. Love in our lives on earth qualifies us to dwell in the eternal presence of the God of love.

When Paul spoke of those who would be banished from the presence of God, he was speaking of those who do not know, or obey, the God of love. Again, unloving people have forfeited their right to dwell eternally in the presence of love. And for this reason, John is as harsh as Paul when it comes to identifying with the love of God:

If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar, for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen (1 Jn 4:20).

If one cannot lovingly dwell in the presence of his needy brother whom he sees, then certainly he has given up his right to dwell in the presence of the God of love for eternity. Understanding this point opens the door into what Paul was revealing in 2 Thessalonians 1:6-9.

B. Knowing the God of love:

Those who do not know the God of love, are not candidates to dwell in the presence of God for eternity. They certainly will not respond to the gospel message of love that was revealed through the Son of God, through whom God so loved the world. This brings us to the mission of Jesus on earth, which mission included two things He wanted to accomplish: (1) Jesus wanted to reveal the God of love to the world. (2) He wanted to reveal the gospel through which those who would come to know the God of love would be motivated to connect with Him.

For these reasons John recorded the early ministry of Jesus. There is more to what John wrote in John 20:31 than simply an apologetic of who Jesus was. Jesus was certainly miraculously proved to be the Son of God. But there was more to the ministry of Jesus than proving that He was a miracle worker and great teacher. That which was more was meant to motivate within those who really believed who He was, and to respond to His gospel message. He was that message of love, and He called on all men to believe that He was the revelation of the God of love. He was God's gospel message into the world in order to move people unto obedience of the gospel.

Jesus' mission to reveal the God of love began with the revelation of what John later explained in more detail in 1 John 4. "*God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son*" (Jn 3:16). This is the God whom Jesus sought to reveal, and the God of the gospel we must know. If one truly knows the love that motivated God to send His only begotten Son into the world, then he will respond to the gospel that the God of grace offered to the world. We can state the point in simple, but precise terms: **if one does not know the love of God, he or she will not be baptized into the death, burial and resurrection of God's love through Jesus.** But if one truly knows the God of love, then certainly he or she will obey the gospel of love. There will be no argument about whether "baptism is necessary for salvation." There will be only obedience from the heart in response to the heart of God.

This thought is similar to the transformation of the heart of Israel that God worked through the national captivity of Israel. When the time came for Israel's returned from captivity, their hearts had been changed from rebellion in idolatry to submission. Before the day of their captivity, however, God prophesied of the changed heart that they would experience:

And I will give them a heart to know Me, that I am the Lord. And they will be My people and I will be their God. For they will return to Me with their whole heart (Jr 24:7).

Jesus came into the world to reveal the heart of God. He "*was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*" (Jn 1:1). We would correctly assume, therefore, that "God in the flesh" (Jn 1:14) would reveal the God who remained in the spirit. The objective of the incarnation, therefore, was to reveal to the world the nature of the God who is spirit (Jn 4:24). Jesus came into the world as a revelation of the "world" in which He existed before His incarnation. But in reference to those who first received this revelation in the physical world, there was a problem. God was in the world through Jesus, but "*the world did not know Him*" (Jn 1:10). The world did not understand the One who walked among those who were of the nature of the world. Because many of those who were in the world were of worldly behavior, it was not possible for them to understand the nature of the God of love.

When John was baptizing in the wilderness, he said to those who were sent to him by the Pharisees, "*There stands One among you whom you do*

not know” (Jn 1:26). It was not simply that they did not know of Him, but that they, because of their worldly spirit, would not know the loving nature of Him. Jesus once said to some worldly minded religionists, “*But I know you, that you do not have the love of God in you*” (Jn 5:42). Since this statement was made at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, He immediately identified those who would have a difficult time accepting Him as a representative from God. However, those who were not of the spirit of this world would eventually come to know Him, that He was the Christ, the Son of the living God of love (Mt 16:16).

When Nicodemus came to Jesus in the night, the light was coming on in his mind concerning who Jesus was. “‘*Rabbi,*’ Nicodemus stated, ‘*we know that You are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him*’” (Jn 3:2).

At the time Nicodemus came to Jesus, many others were beginning to realize that Jesus was more than a man. They were beginning to know the love of the God from whom He came. His mission into this world was not only to reveal the gospel, but also to reveal the God of love who sent the gospel into the world through Jesus. Jesus was both a revelation of the God of love, but also the bearer of the gospel. The revelation of the

God of love through Jesus was to motivate people unto obedience of the gospel that Jesus revealed. Those who would know God through Jesus would obey the gospel.

C. **Revelation of and obedience to the gospel:**

In the final days of His ministry, Jesus lifted His eyes to heaven and prayed, “*And this is life eternal, that they might know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent*” (Jn 17:3). And herein is revealed the connection between the ministry of Jesus in His revelation of the gospel, and the God of love who sent the Messenger. Paul had revealed that those who do not obey the gospel will not reside in eternal life in the presence of God. In the preceding statement, Jesus said that eternal life is to know God and Jesus whom He has sent. The only conclusion is that in order to have eternal life one must be moved by who God is, and subsequently, desire to obey the God of love in order to eternally live in His presence. Knowing the God of love who was revealed through the incarnation of the Son in the flesh, therefore, should motivate one to obey the gospel that was revealed through the cross and resurrection.

Jesus came into this world, but many of the religious leaders at the

time did not know Him because He represented in the flesh the loving God of heaven. At one time when Jesus was in the temple, He cried out to the multitudes who were gathered there, *“You both know Me and you know where I am from. And I have not come on My own, but He who sent Me is true, whom you do not know”* (Jn 7:28). They knew of Jesus the man, but they did not know the Father who sent His Son into the world. The religious leaders did not know the God of love. John explained the reason for this:

And this is the condemnation, that light has come into the world and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light lest his deeds should be exposed (Jn 3:19,20).

Jesus was the light that came into the world (Jn 8:12). But if those of darkness came into the light, they would have to confess that their deeds were evil. And in reference to religious leaders, those leaders who do not know the Light of God will continue in their evil religious ways of darkness. False prophets will always turn away from the God of love simply because they do not desire that their evil religious practices that are

followed by thousands, be exposed as evil to their gullible followers.

This explains what Paul meant in 2 Thessalonians 1:8,9 in reference to those who “do not know God.” If they loved the light of the love of God that was revealed through Jesus, then they would obey the gospel light of Jesus who revealed the light. But because they hated the Light, they refused to obey the gospel. What Paul was saying in the revelation of 2 Thessalonians 1 was that **those who refuse to obey the gospel reveal that they seek to walk in the darkness of their own worldly ways.** They could know of God, but they would not know God. The proof that one truly knows God is revealed in his or her obedience to the gospel. It is the same thought that Jesus stated in reference to false religious prophets:

Many will say to Me in that day, “Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and performed many wonderful works in Your name?” And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you. Depart from Me you who practice lawlessness.” (Mt 7:22,23).

These were religious people about whom Jesus spoke. They did all the glorious self-sanctifying religious works, but they refused to do

"the will of My Father who is in heaven" (Mt 7:21). Every religious charlatan should seriously consider these words. Jesus spoke of religious people who would not do the will of the Father in obedience to the gospel in baptism because they did not know the heart of the God who sacrificed His own Son. They are thus as the Samaritans. Jesus said of them, "**You worship what you do not know. We know what we worship, for salvation is from the Jews**" (Jn 4:22).

There are many religious prophets among us today about whom Jesus would say as He said to the Pharisees, "**You neither know Me, nor My Father. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also**" (Jn 8:19). If they had known the heart of God, then they would have responded to the Son of God who was the light of God in their midst. Therefore, **those who obey the gospel are acknowledging that they know the one true and living God of love.** And because of their obedience to the gospel, they are set free. Consider this when reading the words of Jesus in John 8:32: "*And you will know the truth [of the gospel], and the truth [of the gospel] will make you free [from sin].* Is this not the same declaration that Jesus made in Mark 16:16, but in different words? "*He who believes [the truth of the gospel] and is baptized will be saved. But he who does*

not believe [the truth of the gospel] will be condemned."

20 "THAT SILLY CROSS"

"Unlike Jesus, I don't need a silly cross to save my people. I believe I'm the messiah of our time, I'm gonna save this nation like Jesus saved Christians. Except, I'll be able to save you without some silly cross."

So said the leader of one of the prominent political parties in South Africa. Such blasphemous statements remind us of the circumstances surrounding Herod when he allowed the people to say of him, "*The voice of a god and not a man*" (At 12:22). And then the Holy Spirit reported on the result of Herod's arrogant behavior: "*And immediately an angel of the Lord smote him because he did not give God the glory. And he was eaten by worms and died*" (At 12:23).

In response to the preceding statement of the South African politician, Dr. Jan Venter wrote in the *Farmer's Weekly*, the century-old weekly publication of South Africa, "Leaders who claim godlike qualities often face disastrous ends" (*FW*, April 13, 2018). Such a disastrous end came upon Herod. We have witnessed throughout history the same end of similar self-proclaimed demagogues.

God established governing authorities for the sake of the people of a nation. Therefore, *"let every soul [of a nation] be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God. The authorities that exist are ordained by God"* (Rm 13:1). God ordained government, not specific government officials.

When some authorities called the apostles Peter and John into their council chambers and commanded them not to speak in the name of Jesus, the apostles responded, *"Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things that we have seen and heard"* (At 4:19,20). If ever our religious leaders of a country move into the political wings of government, and make statements as that which was voiced by the preceding opportunistic South African politician or Herod, then it is time to take a stand for the gospel.

Satan does not idly lurk quietly in a dim street alley awaiting for some unsuspecting innocent to wander where lions roar. He more often covertly rises in the ranks of leadership, whether in religion or government in order to enact antichrist laws that reflect their denial of the gospel. Before indifferent Christians finally realize that the "governing authorities"

are commanding us *"not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus,"* it is sometimes too late. Before the indifferent realize it, they have lost their freedom.

When Islam swept across North Africa in the eighth century, this antichrist religion swept Christianity off that part of the continent. When the atheistic communist regime of Mao se Tung rose to power in China, he too did religious house cleaning and sought to sweep the gospel out of China. It is not the work of Satan that is the problem. He is only doing his business. The problem is indifferent Christians who have lost their first love. Ephesus has for two thousand years reminded us that if we lose our first love, we are gone as the church.

In one of our neighboring countries to the north of us, some secular politicians have begun to affect the churches of the nation. One example was the banning of land to be sold to religious groups for the construction of church buildings in the capital city. Another example occurred in our country of residence. When anyone buys food from any of the major food suppliers, he or she unknowingly pays the Halaal price to a Muslim imam who must bless the food. This is a violation of any constitution that guarantees freedom of religion. Christians in South Africa are not free from this ransom price that must be paid to the

Muslim faith when they purchase food at any of the large food stores. The problem is ignorance of the law on the part of the general public who mostly know nothing of this practice by the Muslims in free-market enterprises within a democracy. The rest of the citizenship of the country keep themselves in darkness by their own indifference. When Christians cease preaching the light of the gospel, darkness reigns.

Satan often works himself in by way of the back door. Those Christians who are indifferent—which indifference they pass off as being forbearing and patient (Rv 2:9)—will always find themselves at the mercy of the devices of Satan. Because of the motivation of the gospel, Christianity is a "militant" faith, but not with guns and suicide bombers. It is through a persistent stand for the truth of the gospel that enables Christians to be the preservative of society.

When Jesus said, "*Be wise as serpents and harmless as doves,*" He did not mean "indifferent as serpents," and "idle as doves" (Mt 10:16). Those metaphors would make no sense. We must not forget that Jesus used the

metaphor "wise as serpents," not "wise as Solomon." Serpents have a bite, and that bite has venom. A serpent will certainly be patient. He will not strike unless threatened. But if threatened, he will strike with a venomous bite. The gospel is a venomous strike against the darkness of evil.

It is quite interesting that Jesus would use the behavior of a serpent in reference to those who follow Him. Unfortunately, many of Jesus' disciples today forget what Jesus said to His immediate followers: "*Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword*" (Mt 10:34). We never hear the subject of "Christian serpents" preached. We feel that most indifferent Christians have no desire to bite back with the truth of the gospel when threatened ... ever.

But when the truth of the gospel is threatened, Christians must be reminded that it is time to swing the sword of the Spirit in standing up for the gospel. When political "messiahs" arrogantly blaspheme the cross by which we are saved, it is time to stand forth with the truth of the gospel.

Epilogue INTO THE STREETS

When we lived and preached the gospel in the West Indies in the early 70s, Saturday was a special day of evangelism. We remember going to the local street markets on Saturday morning, standing up on two Coke cases stacked upon one another, and with a microphone in hand, preaching the gospel to those who were busy in the market buying food for the week. The people seemed like they were not listening as they scurried about making their purchases. But they were. We had tracts available. Sometimes we handed them out to the people, and at other times the people would simply come over to the “Coke Crate Preacher” and pick up what they needed for the week.

Those were the days when people in the West Indies were zealous to hear the message of the gospel. In those days we could “clap” (knock) at ten houses in a particular community, and if the people were home, nine would invite us in to study the Bible. There was receptivity and a desire to hear the gospel preached on street corners, in the markets, and where ever there was an audience. That receptivity may have cooled in many parts of the world, but that does not mean that our evangelistic spirit must also cool.

For example, we were emotion-

ally overwhelmed one day by an anomaly where we now live in a large urban center in Africa. It is a suburban part of the city where people seem to be so busy. We too were busy people on one particular day. In our hurry to go here and there, we had a fortunate encounter that reminded us of those days forty-five years before when we stood up on a Coke crate to preach the gospel in market places of the West Indies.

We were scurrying about our business in town on this eventful day. All we did seemed so frustratingly urgent. We zealously flew from one store to another, picking up those material items that would eventually burn in the great cataclysmic fire at the last trumpet. All those things seemed so important at the time. We had no time for people, only for those who collected our money at the register after we had feverishly rummaged through a host of options on the store shelves. It was all so important, so urgent ... and so meaningless.

In our rush out of one shopping mall, and destined for another store, a glimpse out of our eyes caught this elderly couple on the sidewalk in the hot sun in front of the shopping mall. The aged man had on his tie and looked presentable for what the couple were doing. His wife in her

feebleness sat faithfully by his side on the street in a camping chair. Her cane lay beside her as she looked up through dim eyes with a neck brace to stabilize her weak muscles. There they were together in a common mission to do their part in preaching the gospel. It was a vision of faithfulness that would surely reap the pronouncement in the end, "Well done My good and faithful servants."

Both of the mid-sixty saints weakly stood before inquiring people who were discussing one-on-one with them what the two faithfuls had in their feeble hands and on their warm hearts. There were no banners. No "end-of-time" signs. There were only Bibles, God's word. There was the source of the gospel message held in the tender grasp of these messengers, and to the best of their ability, they stood alone there to represent their Savior with precious words from the word of God about the gospel of Jesus. It was a picture that shocked us into spiritual reality, and reminded us of our senseless rush to fill a garage full of bonfire kindling for the last day.

The old couple pointed with arthritic fingers to favorite passages that would bring hope to the inquisitive visitors who had taken time out of their busy rush from store to store to buy, as we did, what at the time now seemed to be so worthless in compari-

son to their message. He stood there in the heat of the sun with a pleasant smile on his face giving hope to some earthly wanderer. Likewise, she, faithfully by his side in the camp chair, did the same as some searchers stooped to their knees in order to hear the precious words that flowed forth from her wrinkled lips. It was a glorious sight that burned a photographic image on our minds that will be there forever.

We gazed in wonder and pondered what causes old people to do things as this. They both could have been in the security of their own home in the comfort of easy chairs, wasting their minds away viewing some senseless television show. But there they were in the heat of the day. As you certainly should be doing as you read of this spectacle of dedication, we questioned our own commitment to the cause of preaching Jesus every day and everywhere. We find it difficult to recover from the sight of the ministry of these two dedicated angels of light who both witnessed by their lives, and taught by their lips, the precious message of the gospel of Jesus.

What faith did this elderly couple have in order to be so overwhelmingly committed? There they were, struggling on the streets of the upper financial class of Durbanville, South Africa doing what they could to

preach Jesus to a passing crowd of the “walking dead.” We could witness their faith. It was a faith that did not content itself to camp in some beautiful church house on padded pews on Sunday morning, and then sign the preaching of the gospel off with a closing prayer. It was not a faith that found contentment in a cocooned fellowship of fellow religionists at a love feast. These two gospel-driven souls may have been a part of such, but their faith carried them far beyond church-house doors, beyond sanctuaries, and beyond even the security of their own fellowship of believers. Theirs was not a “church-house religion” that contented itself with ceremonial religiosity.

They were there on that street as a testimony that the gospel must be preached to every creature in all the world. Because of their physical feebleness, they could not go far into

all the world. Nevertheless, they could go to a sidewalk just outside a shopping mall in their home town. The gospel of God’s heart had moved them out of their comfort zone and before the lives of those who were scurrying about buying flammable material for the great bonfire to come.

In our own scurry to purchase kindling for the same fire, we consider our own commitment to proclaim the gospel to a world that is rushing past us. We sometimes question whether we are allowing the full power of the gospel to reach into the inner most confines of our hearts in order to drive us to make all necessary sacrifices that must be made to preach Jesus to the world. Gospel living is not something we do. It must be something we are. Sometimes it takes a Coke crate or street corner to determine if we have not lost our first love.